

**HOWARD KIMELDORF INTERVIEWS FOR *REDS OR RACKETS*?**

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**ASHER HARER OF ILWU LOCAL 10, SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY**

**INTERVIEWEE:** ASHER HARER

**INTERVIEWERS:** HOWARD KIMELDORF

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[00:00:00] **HOWARD KIMELDORF:** This is an interview being conducted in San Francisco [San Francisco, California] on 5/25 with Asher Harer. I think I know how to spell your name, but why don't you do it again for me.

[00:00:23] **ASHER HARER:** A-S-H-E-R H-A-R-E-R.

[00:00:26] **HOWARD:** Yeah. I read one of your pieces, incidentally, in the waterfront collection of writers [*The Waterfront Writers: The Literature of Work*] .

[00:00:31] **ASHER:** Oh, yes.

[00:00:32] **HOWARD:** That was very good. You've got a good touch.

[00:00:34] **ASHER:** I have a good number of rejection slips.

[00:00:37] **HOWARD:** [laughing] We all do! At least you got something published—that's what counts.

[00:00:42] **ASHER:** Right.

[00:00:43] **HOWARD:** Ok, why don't you start off by telling me how you got involved in the longshore industry—the year, the circumstances, and your reasons for doing so.

[00:00:54] **ASHER:** First of all, I'd like to touch on the differences between the East Coast and the West.

[00:00:56] **HOWARD:** Oh, sure, please.

[00:00:58] **ASHER:** As you probably know, the stronghold of the IWW [International Workers of the World] was in the West, and there are good reasons for that. The skilled workers had been organized in the East and even in the Midwest for a long period of time. The organization began of the big unions around the time of the American Civil War. They had become not only organized but they had become, to an extent, over-organized and bureaucratized. [audio interference] Whereas in the West, the unions were quite new. The conditions of the workers, even the skilled workers, were much worse. There was an opening for a radical point of view. The unions weren't so set. The leadership was not so established, and there was room for radical ideas and radical points of view in those unions.

[00:02:02] **HOWARD:** So, if I can interrupt then, you're attributing it to the less developed structure of unionism in the West Coast?

[00:02:07] **ASHER:** That's part of it. And the belated organization that took place on the West Coast. These were definitely factors in the differences between the unions. The ILA [International Longshoremen's Association] was organized a long time before the West Coast was organized. The West Coast actually did not have an established trade union for the longshoremen until the 1934 strike, whereas the ILA had unions, not only on the East Coast, but in the Southern ports at that time. They had an established and very bureaucratic leadership which, even at that time, had mob affiliations. They would murder their opponents; they'd end up at the bottom of the river and so forth. Whereas here, that didn't exist. The Communist Party, which came out of the Socialist Party and out of the Wobblies, had a very strong contingent all up and down the coast. At that time, the Communist Party was in the tail end of what is called the "Third Period" [position held by Communist Third International from 1928-1933, marked by hostility to reformists and establishment of dual unions] . You know what the Third Period was? And the tail end of the Third Period—still radical. They hadn't gone into the Popular Front period, the next period. They were still quite radical and had a lot of combativeness. They had a lot of very fine people in their ranks—real fighters, agitators, and speakers and writers and so forth. They entered into this process up and down the coast. Of course, they made their biggest success in the longshore.

[Harry] Bridges was very closely affiliated, politically and in other ways, with the Communist Party. It was never proven he was a member, and I don't think it's very important. The important thing: that he did follow the line laid down by the Communist Party, and he received great help from the Communist Party. Writers, help of all sorts. Especially in the field of guidance on tactical and various strategic problems. I think that's the big difference. That's why, the big difference in the way they were organized and the kind of success they had and so forth.

[00:04:36] **HOWARD:** Let me bounce a few ideas. I just finished completing a chapter on the early history of the longshore industry, and I argue precisely what you're saying about the greater influence of the Wobblies. I was tracing it to a lot of other things—which I don't know if it makes sense or not. One thing I was arguing is that the composition of the workforce on the West Coast was drawn from industries that had radical traditions

like Western Federation of Miners, the lumber workers in the Northwest, and, of course, seamen who had this cosmopolitan vision of the world. That doesn't seem to be the case on the East Coast. I was looking at really the sources that the occupation drew from rather than what you're talking about—the degree of development of the union. You may have a good point, though; that may be—

[00:05:18] **ASHER:** Well, you're going back a bit further. It's true that the most radical unions have usually been those—not only that they were terribly exploited—that can have a deadening effect, too. But that they were composed of workers that were relatively footloose. They didn't go to a certain plant and work there the rest of their lives, you know? They were longshoremen. They go to work one day, and they work here one day, they work two days someplace else. They go back, and they congregate—first in the shape-up, and then later in the union hall. They have this relative freedom from the direct control of the employers, whereas, if you go to the same job everyday working in a plant, you're directly under the control of employers all the time. You tend to identify with employers to a certain extent. That's not true of longshoremen. It's even less true of merchant seamen.

[00:06:18] **HOWARD:** Ok, what about the East Coast longshore situation? They were still casual industry over there.

[00:06:24] **ASHER:** That's right, they were. You've probably gone back in their history; you know how they were first organized. It was a very radical union in the beginning. But it had become thoroughly dominated by a class-collaborationist leadership, tied in with the mob, playing games with employers, kickbacks, anything you could think of. And they would crush their opposition, virtually crush them. They'd end up at the bottom of the river. That sort of thing.

[00:06:53] **HOWARD:** That's certainly true in the '30s; there's no question about that. In 1919, there was a major strike in New York. You may have heard about it. The last major convulsion that took place prior to the postwar period. The Wobblies were there, they were handing out hundreds of leaflets all over the waterfront. The workers turned their back on them. Didn't happen on the West Coast. That's intriguing to me. I'm not sure how you explain that.

[00:07:15] **ASHER:** The Wobblies on the East Coast were a rare item. They did go into some big strikes, like in garment, Lawrence [textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts] , and so forth.

[00:07:28] **HOWARD:** Paterson [silk strike in Paterson, New Jersey] .

[00:07:29] **ASHER:** But there weren't many Wobblies there. The strikes happened without Wobblies. Might have been a few. The Wobblies came in, some of them from the West Coast were sent in to help organize them. They made a big name. But the Wobblies had a *modus operandi*. For example, they were against contracts—but you know all this, you studied the history of the Wobblies. They were against signing contracts; they would go in and conduct their strike, try to go all the way, as far as they could go on their ideas. Then they would pull their people out—pull their important people out. They wouldn't work in the plant; they wouldn't even stay in the area. They would go away again.

Mostly in the East Coast, there were very few big Wobbly actions except they provided leadership for a very short period of time. Then they would leave and go to where there was another hotspot. I think that's probably the role they played in that strike. I don't know exactly. I don't know how many Wobblies there were on the waterfront in New York at that time. Do you know?

[00:08:36] **HOWARD:** It's very difficult to find out. They had a fairly good base among the Italian longshoremen. Less so among the Irish. They talked about recruiting 700 during the course of the strike. Of course, they recruited significantly more on the West Coast during many of these strikes, too. Seattle was

three-quarters or more Wobbly in the local up there.

What evidence do you have, or could you tell me about the legacy that the Wobblies laid down during the immediate post-World War I period? That was still visible in 1933-1934 when the Communists became active?

[00:09:10] **ASHER:** Post-World War I, they were already on their way down. They played the big role before World War I.

[00:09:18] **HOWARD:** What are you thinking of, in particular?

[00:09:23] **ASHER:** The Wobblies took a stand during World War I, of course, opposed to the war. Rather than play a careful role, staying in the unions, opposing the war but doing it politically, doing it through talking to workers and trying to build sentiment against the war and build their own ranks, they took what I consider an ultra-left position. Getting up on street corners. Then, when one would be arrested, they'd all go and say, "Arrest me, too. I belong with them. They're my comrades." So forth. Which was a foolish way to proceed. As a result, during the Palmer Raids [deportation of leftist radicals circa] , which was right after World War II [sic, World War I] , they got pretty well wiped out. As far as I know, except in certain select areas like in the Northwest, they never played any big role as an organization after that. Here and there. Here and there, but. . .

[00:10:23] **HOWARD:** Pedro [San Pedro, California] in 1923? Portland?

[00:10:24] **ASHER:** Yeah, they did. Well, 1923, that was shortly thereafter. I'm talking about the whole historical period.

[00:10:29] **HOWARD:** Ok, yeah, you're right. They're pretty much decimated after '23. 1919 San Francisco, 1919 Seattle, '22 in Portland, and '23 in Pedro, and that's the end of the show.

[00:10:38] **ASHER:** You know more about this than I do. I have a broad historical view of it. I've never gone into it for years.

[00:10:43] **HOWARD:** I've studied it in real detail recently. So, I'm up on that! [laugh]

[00:10:46] **ASHER:** So you would know!

[00:10:46] **HOWARD:** What I was wondering, though—what about the evidences of syndicalism? Or Wobbly ideology that persisted on the waterfront '33-'34?

[00:10:56] **ASHER:** You still find it.

[00:10:57] **HOWARD:** How much of that is Wobbly-inspired and how much is just organically produced by the work itself? That's always intrigued me. These guys were doing work stoppages before the Wobblies came there.

[00:11:08] **ASHER:** That's true. For instance, in our constitution of Local 10, you still have a remnant of Wobbly organizational ideas.

[00:11:20] **HOWARD:** The limit of two terms?

[00:11:21] **ASHER:** The limit of two terms.

[00:11:21] **HOWARD:** Yeah. Is that directly from the Wobblies? Everyone says that, but I don't know.

[00:11:26] **ASHER:** As far as I know, yes. When I came into the union in 1941—when I came to the union,

there were a lot of old Wobblies in the union.

[00:11:37] **HOWARD:** There were?

[00:11:39] **ASHER:** They played a big role as far as rank-and-file organizers and so forth in the 1948 strike. I worked on the educational squads. I was a member of the strike committee, and there were a lot of ex-Wobblies—who called themselves ex—called themselves Wobblies.

[00:12:01] **HOWARD:** They did?

[00:12:01] **ASHER:** Yes. They'd say, "I'm a Wobbly."

[00:12:02] **HOWARD:** Is that right? In '48?

[00:12:06] **ASHER:** Oh sure, in '48, quite a few of them. I can go back in notes and find names of some of them, I guess. But they were there, and they were among the most militant fighters. They were old guys, most of them. They were among the most militant fighters in that strike. And that was the last militant strike that the longshoremen ever had. In some ways. Since then they've been walking picket lines, negotiating behind the backs of the membership. That was the last strike run by the membership. More recent ones have not by the membership.

[00:12:37] **HOWARD:** Yeah. I want to ask about that when we get there. Let me proceed through this chronologically.

So you started in '41 on the waterfront. What about your recollections from talking to people or whatever evidence you may have—how would you characterize what was going on the waterfront [in] '33-'34, with the MWIU? Was it much of a force, the Marine Workers Industrial Union?

[00:13:02] **ASHER:** Well, you see that was a period of red trade unions. You're familiar with that. What happened is the Communist Party isolated itself in these unions. The idea was to build a union that was going to move right forward to the revolution. Most workers will go to the union that controls the jobs. They're more interested in working than they are in putting their politics on the line and not working. Most of the Communist Party members at that time—and I've talked to some of them. They held both books.

[00:13:39] **HOWARD:** They did?

[00:13:40] **ASHER:** They held a book in ILWU [International Longshore and Warehouse Union] , and they held a book in the Marine—what do you call it?

[00:13:43] **HOWARD:** The Marine Workers Industrial Union.

[00:13:46] **ASHER:** Yeah. They held both books. They used one of them to work, and the other one for political reasons, for various political reasons.

[00:13:56] **HOWARD:** The Wobblies did the same thing, they had the red card.

[00:13:59] **ASHER:** Wobblies, too. There was a Wobbly headquarters here in 1948.

[00:14:02] **HOWARD:** There was?

[00:14:02] **ASHER:** And some of these longshoremen on the waterfront belonged to it.

[00:14:05] **HOWARD:** Still?

[00:14:06] **ASHER:** Yes! In 1948.

[00:14:07] **HOWARD:** I had no idea that it lingered around that long.

[00:14:10] **ASHER:** Sure, they were around here.

[00:14:12] **HOWARD:** Do you think that the MWIU had much of an impact in directing that strike or influencing its course?

[00:14:19] **ASHER:** Members, but they were also members of the ILWU.

[00:14:21] **HOWARD:** Or ILA, I guess, at that time.

[00:14:25] **ASHER:** ILA at that time. They hadn't taken them to the ILWU. No, I don't think so. The red trade union period was an adventure. Actually, in some cases, it left the control of the unions that controlled the jobs to the right-wingers. It moved the left-wingers out. Instead of fighting inside to change the policies and eventually to gain leadership of those unions, they moved out. They didn't do that in the ILA, which was fortunate. Which was fortunate. I'm a Trotskyite, but the Communist Party played a big role in the 1934 strike.

[00:15:04] **HOWARD:** How would you characterize that role?

[00:15:06] **ASHER:** They played a leadership role in carrying the strike through.

[00:15:11] **HOWARD:** Do you think the rank-and-file saw it as a leadership role?

[00:15:14] **ASHER:** Oh, certainly they did. Of course. And they had a big membership in the ILA.

[00:15:21] **HOWARD:** How big would you estimate it?

[00:15:23] **ASHER:** I have no idea.

[00:15:24] **HOWARD:** That's difficult.

[00:15:25] **ASHER:** You'll have to talk to somebody who was in the Communist Party. I never was.

[00:15:29] **HOWARD:** My problem is the ones who know aren't talking.

[00:15:32] **ASHER:** They're not talking?

[00:15:32] **HOWARD:** Yeah, not really. Let me go off tape here.

[PAUSE IN THE RECORDING OF THE INTERVIEW FOR CONVERSATION OFF TAPE]

Ok. I'm just trying to get an assessment of the role of the Communists in the '34 strike. We were just talking about it generally. What about the political impact among the rank-and-file? Was it significant, in your mind? I know this is all secondhand, of course. Was it just a question of pork chops [union activity motivated by self-interest] ? Or was there something more going on?

[00:16:03] **ASHER:** Well, the basis of every strike, by and large, trade union struggle, is economic. It's pork chops. As a matter of fact, that's what the Communist Party used to talk about: pork chops. Pork chops on the table for your family, that sort of thing. Even when they were talking about political things, they introduced that.

I think it's primarily economic, that the Communist Party—and it was well known—had given decisive leadership in the 1934 strike. They were still riding that wave of approval of the way that they had led the strike.

Bridges had become almost like a cult figure. When he would come into a meeting—not the ILWU—when he would come into a meeting uptown anywhere, the radicals or [?inaudible?] , people would stand up, like he was a god or something.

[00:17:00] **HOWARD:** Oh yeah?

[00:17:01] **ASHER:** Oh sure. And, if you didn't stand up, people were liable to yell at you.

[00:17:07] **HOWARD:** I heard about that. Someone suggested that was very well orchestrated by his own people, right?

[00:17:11] **ASHER:** Oh, yes, yes.

[00:17:14] **HOWARD:** Why do you consider the role of the CP [Communist Party] decisive? Could you elaborate that at all? Were they just one of many forces, or were they more than that?

[00:17:23] **ASHER:** There were other forces in there. There were a lot of Wobblies. Ex-Wobblies mostly. People that had become disillusioned with the way Wobblies had operated, especially their ultra-leftism. But [they] still considered themselves Wobblies, you know, [they were] for one big union and so on and so forth. Saw the employers as their main enemy, and were radicals. Spoke in the radical way of unions that supported the strike in an important way.

Then there were Socialists. In the '34 strike there were some Trotskyists. Of course 1948 strike there were quite a few Trotskyists up and down the course, including me. I was the only one on the strike committee at that time. There were other forces in the 1934 strike. Of course, there were a lot of different forces in the 1948 strike. A lot.

But in the 1934 strike—in any economic struggle like this, you have to be prepared to go all the way. Now, that takes a leadership which sees the employers as their enemy, not as someone that you're going to make a deal with. But sees them as an enemy. Especially in an organizing strike where you're trying to build a union, and you have to go through a general strike to do it. You have to have a stern and committed leadership to do a job like that. The three major strikes in the 1934 period, which was the beginning of the turn upward for the trade union movement, were all led by radicals. They were all led by radicals. Communist Party on the West Coast, the Trotskyists in Minneapolis, and the [A. J.] Muste group in Toledo, Ohio, the big Auto-Lite strike [in] . They were all led by radicals. Those three strikes were the turning points—they led the way. Have you read Labor's Giant Step?

[00:19:31] **HOWARD:** [Art] Preis?

[00:19:31] **ASHER:** Preis? [pronounced like price]

[00:19:32] **HOWARD:** Preis? Is that how it's pronounced? Yes, I have.

[00:19:34] **ASHER:** You have read it.

[00:19:35] **HOWARD:** Yeah.

[00:19:35] **ASHER:** There's a whole chapter on it.

[00:19:36] **HOWARD:** Yeah. I think that is significant: the fact that radicals were the only ones that could assume leadership at that time and carry it through to its logical conclusion.

[00:19:44] **ASHER:** And then, after they led the way and showed it could be done, then other unions began to follow in their path.

[00:19:51] **HOWARD:** The question I'm getting at—it's a tough one. I know you can't answer it if you weren't there, most of the guys who were there can't answer it—is, whether there was any kind of a radicalizing impact, in terms of political consciousness, as a result of that '34 strike. When the Communists and other left formations were talking about these guys are class enemies. They said it was more than a question of economics. They talked about controlling the waterfront and things like that. Syndicalist sort of ideas.

[00:20:15] **ASHER:** That's right, they had ideas like that.

[00:20:17] **HOWARD:** Question—did that rub off? Did it have an impact? Maybe one way I can ask you that is by saying, was there anything to this thing of the “'34 men”? Did they tend to identify themselves as a unique group within the union?

[00:20:30] **ASHER:** Oh yes.

[00:20:31] **HOWARD:** What was the basis of their identity?

[00:20:35] **ASHER:** A common struggle. I came into the union after the start of World War II. When it was necessary to expand the union because of all the war shipping that was going on. The attitude toward us, which they called “Johnny-come-latelys,” was really in a sense nasty. They would ask you—if you get in an argument or even a discussion about something that was political or had to do with the trade union movement—“Where were you during the 1934 strike?”

[00:21:17] **HOWARD:** Is that right?

[00:21:18] **ASHER:** And I would say, “During the 1934 strike, I was going to school!” As if that was a crushing rejoinder. I must have had that directed at me a hundred times, and the others went through it, too. Then when you went to work for a gang—you'd have eight men off-shore, eight men onshore—you usually had four of the old timers in the gang, and they would always take the off-shore. The off-shore's safer. You don't have loads going over your head.

[00:21:52] **HOWARD:** Yeah, it's a little bit easier.

[00:21:54] **ASHER:** Loading canned goods, a case could fall off, you know. You could get injured. They would always take the off-shore, and they'd put the newcomers on the inshore. There were all sorts of conflicts that took place over methods of working and so on and so forth—and the boss would always side with the offshore group on how the work was supposed to be done. A few revolts did take place because at that time, the young guys weren't used to this backbreaking work. They adjusted to it, you know. But they didn't see any sense in doing something which was difficult if you could work out an easier way to do it. But you had a lot of old Swedes and Finns down there. A lot of ex-sailors. At one time, it appeared to me, as a newcomer, that about half that union was composed of ex-sailors. Guys that had gone to sea and then had come ashore either illegally—jumped ship, which many of them admitted that they had done. Only later had they applied for citizenship after they'd been here for a long time. They had a lot of experience going to sea, a lot of experience longshoring. They knew what they were doing for the most part. They weren't open to any new ideas about how to do anything.



[00:23:17] **HOWARD:** What about their political ideas?

[00:23:21] **ASHER:** It was a mixture. I would not say that the union, a majority, was a radical union. Most of them were just ordinary working guys, men who didn't read very much, who were concerned with the family, their cars, paying for a home. Having enough money to enjoy themselves. Most of them supported the war, including the Communist Party, as you know.

[00:23:53] **HOWARD:** Let me ask you a few questions about this. You came in '41, right? What were your reasons for joining Local 10 at that time?

[00:24:01] **ASHER:** My reason for joining Local 10? Because it was an important industrial union.

[00:24:04] **HOWARD:** Ok, so it was politically decided, right?

[00:24:07] **ASHER:** Politically.

[00:24:08] **HOWARD:** Now, you were in the SWP [Socialist Workers Party] at that time?

[00:24:10] **ASHER:** I joined SWP in 1937.

[00:24:12] **HOWARD:** Ok. What kind of previous industrial work did you have? Or did you have any?

[00:24:17] **ASHER:** Oh, yes, I'd been an agricultural worker. I'd been in the culinary game, I'd been a waiter, cook. I'd done all sorts of work. You know, like most people knocking around in the '30s. I'd done all sorts of work, a little bit of this, a little bit of that. My main experience had been in food. Food business. I belonged to Local 10 here in this union for quite a long period of time.

[00:24:47] **HOWARD:** So, it would seem like it would take an awful lot of guts to go into Local 10, the stronghold of the CP.

[00:24:52] **ASHER:** I didn't go directly into Local 10.

[00:24:54] **HOWARD:** Oh, interesting.

[00:24:55] **ASHER:** I went into Local 6.

[00:24:56] **HOWARD:** Oh, warehouse.

[00:24:57] **ASHER:** Yeah, at the time I went in, you couldn't get into Local 10.

[00:25:04] **HOWARD:** Even in '41, huh?

[00:25:06] **ASHER:** No. They were taking mostly people from Local 6 and from Local 2 and affiliated locals.

[00:25:13] **HOWARD:** That's interesting. I never heard that before.

[00:25:15] **ASHER:** Yes.

[00:25:15] **HOWARD:** What's Local 2 and Local—

[00:25:17] **ASHER:** Local 2 is the ship scalers. Local 6 is the warehouse. Then there was another local.

[00:25:24] **HOWARD:** You just mentioned it. I'm sorry, what was it?

[00:25:27] **ASHER:** Did I?

[00:25:28] **HOWARD:** Yeah, you did. You said Local 2, 6, and something else. Never heard of the other one. Was it the walking—no, they didn't have walking bosses in those—

[00:25:37] **ASHER:** That wasn't done until well after 1948 strike.

[00:25:39] **HOWARD:** Checkers, maybe? Was it the checkers local?

[00:25:41] **ASHER:** Checkers.

[00:25:41] **HOWARD:** What local was that?

[00:25:43] **ASHER:** 34.

[00:25:44] **HOWARD:** Same as today, right?

[00:25:45] **ASHER:** Yeah. Local 34.

[00:25:47] **HOWARD:** So those were the guys who filled up the ranks initially in Local 10.

[00:25:51] **ASHER:** And sons and cousins and brothers. That was before Taft-Hartley [Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 which limited the power of unions] when you have to advertise and so on. It was only when the big demand came that you could get into that union. That was a prize catch, to get into Local 10.

[00:26:08] **HOWARD:** Sure.

[00:26:11] **ASHER:** A big thing.

[00:26:12] **HOWARD:** How did you get in, then?

[00:26:12] **ASHER:** I went in through Local 6. I stayed in Local 6 until I got my book, which took me one year. I worked in some of the toughest warehouses in the city, including the ice houses, refrigerated houses. Worked at Western Sugar [Western Sugar Cooperative] where the sugar from the Philippine islands came in. Which was more than 100 pounds. Those were about 140 pounds. I built myself up. I'd been an athlete before, so it wasn't any big problem.

[00:26:47] **HOWARD:** What kind of sports did you do? I'm curious.

[00:26:49] **ASHER:** I was a runner, swimmer. I still swim. I swim three days a week.

[00:26:53] **HOWARD:** You look like you're in good shape.

[00:26:55] **ASHER:** I weigh about 20 pounds less than when I was working as a longshoreman.

[00:26:58] **HOWARD:** Really?

[00:26:59] **ASHER:** The doctor told me after I quit to take-off weight. I had an industrial accident.

[00:27:04] **HOWARD:** Oh, you did?

[00:27:04] **ASHER:** Serious. My back was smashed up. He said, "Keep your weight down to what it was when you were 21 years old. What was it when you were 21?" About 160. He said, "That should be your weight now." So I stay around 162 now.

[00:27:17] **HOWARD:** That's pretty good.

[00:27:18] **ASHER:** When I was longshoring, I weighed about 180.

[00:27:19] **HOWARD:** Did you? A lot more muscle, though?

[00:27:23] **ASHER:** Yeah. I'm still muscular, but the smooth muscles of a swimmer, which are quite different.

[00:27:30] **HOWARD:** Well, it's good to stay in shape. That's important.

[00:27:32] **ASHER:** I'm 70 years old.

[00:27:34] **HOWARD:** Are you really!? You guys amaze me. All these guys. It seems to me, if booze doesn't kill 'em, these longshoremen will live forever. 80, 90 years old.

[00:27:43] **ASHER:** They get cancer, too. Heart attacks.

[00:27:44] **HOWARD:** Yeah, sure.

[00:27:46] **ASHER:** I have nothing wrong with me except a bad back.

[00:27:49] **HOWARD:** Yeah, I've got that. [laugh]

[00:27:50] **ASHER:** Well, it's because of the accident. I had a very serious accident in 1965.

[00:27:55] **HOWARD:** Did you? Yeah.

[00:27:58] **ASHER:** Well, where were we?

[00:27:59] **HOWARD:** You were telling me that you started in Local 6. After a year, you got your book and joined Local 10. So you joined Local 10 in '42, then?

[00:28:06] **ASHER:** '42.

[00:28:08] **HOWARD:** What was it like working on the waterfront in '42?

[00:28:12] **ASHER:** Well, you had this discrimination against you, of course.

[00:28:14] **HOWARD:** Because?

[00:28:15] **ASHER:** Because you were a newcomer. Johnny-come-lately. And also because most of the guys who came down there, a lot of them that came down had a little better education. They were resented, too. Smart alecks coming down here.

[00:28:29] **HOWARD:** What kind of education did you have, by the way?

[00:28:31] **ASHER:** Me?

[00:28:31] **HOWARD:** Yeah.

[00:28:32] **ASHER:** Oh, I went two years to junior college, that's all.

[00:28:35] **HOWARD:** That's it, huh?

[00:28:36] **ASHER:** That's it.

[00:28:36] **HOWARD:** That wasn't real advanced credentials, then?

[00:28:39] **ASHER:** Oh, no, I wasn't a college graduate. College graduates were resented.

[00:28:42] **HOWARD:** But you weren't because of your education.

[00:28:45] **ASHER:** Besides, I'm a smart political. I didn't talk about it. [laughing]

[00:28:48] **HOWARD:** Yeah, right! [laughing] College mouth, we used to call it.

[00:28:53] **ASHER:** No, I didn't. I remember one incident that just stuck out in my mind. We were loading a ship with rice. The whole lower hold was rice. Well, the way it had always been done on the waterfront, according to this goober [sic] in a gang that four Finns on the offshore side. I forget the number of the gang. I probably have it in my notes because I used to come home at night and write notes.

[00:29:20] **HOWARD:** You did? Wow.

[00:29:22] **ASHER:** Yeah. There were four Finns on the offshore side—are you interested in this?

[00:29:26] **HOWARD:** Yeah, sure!

[00:29:28] **ASHER:** We had four newcomers on the inshore side. My partner was also a newcomer; he was a Black guy. Then there were two other guys. There was only one Black person—that was him, my partner. Can't remember his name. There were four of us, all of us young, comparatively speaking.

When the first load came down, went offshore, they started building a table across the middle. About so-high. About belly-high table about a sack and a half wide. Filled all the way across. We asked, "What's that for?" "Well, you land the load—"

[BEGINNING OF PART]

—you stack it on the table, you take it on your shoulder, and you go back and start in the wings, fore and aft, and you come out. Sack and sack and sack. Then when you finish one floor, you come back what they call [?cont-and-buildsman?] . In other words, the sack goes in the crack of the other sack, between the sacks. That way you get a much smoother stow, and you get more sacks because you're taking advantage of the—the correct word is 'cont,' C-O-N-T.

[00:30:55] **HOWARD:** Is that right?

[00:30:56] **ASHER:** Yes. Cont-and-buildsman.

[00:30:59] **HOWARD:** That's really interesting.

[00:31:01] **ASHER:** Which means in German, "crack."

[00:31:04] **HOWARD:** Huh. That's where that word came from. [laughing]

[00:31:08] **ASHER:** Anyway this was explained to me by an old German one time. Anyway, they said, "Cont-and-buildsman, that's the way we're going to do it!" So, we started. We got a little ways out, and one of the guys said—I think it was my partner— "This is crazy! Why don't we call for a truck, and put it on a truck, and bring it back here? And then go maybe as high as we can, and come all the way out. Then get some dunnage, build a runway, land it on a truck, and go back again." So, I said, "Jesus Christ, if you do this, they're going to raise hell!" But we decided we were going to do it. So we went back, and we called for a handtruck, two handtrucks. The boss says, "What do you want handtrucks for?" "We want handtrucks because we're going to land our load on a handtruck, and we're going to truck it back to the wing. The hell with that walking it back. We're going to truck it back to the wing." Oh my god, the shit hit the fan. We sat down, we said, "That's it. You give us two trucks—that's the way we're going to work it. We're willing to work, but give us trucks."

[00:32:27] **HOWARD:** Why didn't they want to give you trucks?

[00:32:29] **ASHER:** It'd never been done! They had always worked it that way. And they told us, "You young whippersnappers, you don't know what you're doing! We've always done it this way. Always!" We said, "Well, maybe, but we're not going to do it that way." Finally they conceded. It was a night gang, by the way. No way you could get any more men or anything. No point in firing us. Wouldn't be able to get anybody else to do the work. So they finally sent us two trucks. Well, each guy would take a load. We'd take them back, and it went about 10-12 high. We got our load off real fast, and we'd come back. We had the hook hanging on them.

[00:33:15] **HOWARD:** Is that right?

[00:33:16] **ASHER:** You know it's called "hanging the hook"? It means you're ahead so you get a little breathing spell.

[00:33:20] **HOWARD:** Right.

[00:33:20] **ASHER:** We had the hook hanging on them all the time. And they were older men, too. They got up, I guess, about four high with flooring off. They weren't up to head high. When you get up to head high, then you go back and you go all the way up to the beams. They weren't head high yet; they were about four high. One came out and breathed just a sigh of complete disgust. "Send in a load of dunnage!"

They had to dunnage up and make a runway because they were on sacks. They couldn't run on sacks with wheels. Sent in a load of dunnage; they built themselves a runway. And they called for two trucks.

[00:34:07] **HOWARD:** [laughing] Must have given you a lot of satisfaction as a newcomer, right?

[00:34:10] **ASHER:** Yea! I worked in that gang a month, and we never had that argument again after that. If we got a job like that, with beans or rice or anything in sacks, we'd call for trucks.

[00:34:21] **HOWARD:** You did?

[00:34:23] **ASHER:** They never mentioned it again.

[00:34:25] **HOWARD:** It wasn't possibly a way of stretching the work out, was it?

[00:34:31] **ASHER:** Oh no! Oh no!

[00:34:31] **HOWARD:** Still had to do the work, right? With the same number of men?

[00:34:32] **ASHER:** You still had to do the work, but you did it the hard way.

[00:34:35] **HOWARD:** That's peculiar. I guess those practices just get institutionalized.

[00:34:41] **ASHER:** No, see, it's a way of saving space. The bilge-and-contlen way is a way of saving space.

[00:34:48] **HOWARD:** Oh, I see, so your method was not as space efficient.

[00:34:50] **ASHER:** Oh, no, it was not as space efficient, I should say not. When we came out from the wing, we would put the sacks one on top of the other, right up.

[00:34:59] **HOWARD:** Right. So you didn't sandwich them between.

[00:35:02] **ASHER:** So there were spaces in between. Where they came together. Where the bilge-and-contlen system is you—well, I could show you. You come along a row like this, another row, and then you put the other sack on top. You don't put it even with the other sack. You put it halfway on this sack, halfway on this sack in the crack. The rice settles down into that space.

[00:35:29] **HOWARD:** Ok, I think I see how that works. I see.

[00:35:33] **ASHER:** And it's a space saver; probably in the lower hold of the ship it might save as much as 12-15% of space. So they get that much more.

[00:35:46] **HOWARD:** That much? Ok, that's an interesting illustration.

[00:35:48] **ASHER:** But we had other conflicts with them, too. Like if we were loading barrels, the barrels would come down on giant hooks, and you'd roll them back and head them up. The offshore side would always get the first load. They would take one barrel, and they'd put it right in the center. Then they would go back in the wing and start bringing theirs out. When they get up to that barrel that they'd put in the center, they'd move it over to fill up any space they had. All the gaps would come on your side from then on.

[00:36:22] **HOWARD:** Oh, is that right? So the old timers would do that to you guys?

[00:36:26] **ASHER:** They'd do it every time. And don't you dare move that barrel or that drum.

[00:36:33] **HOWARD:** What's the purpose of that?

[00:36:35] **ASHER:** So you would have all the gaps, you see? Because very seldom would a line go across even where you could fill in.

[00:36:42] **HOWARD:** Doesn't sounds like a very class-conscious thing to do, does it? [laughing]

[00:36:44] **ASHER:** Oh, no, but there's a lot of competition between workers.

[00:36:47] **HOWARD:** Still even in that period, huh?

[00:36:49] **ASHER:** Oh, sure, even now.

[00:36:51] **HOWARD:** Why? You guys had union security.

[00:36:53] **ASHER:** Well, then, it was pride of work. That you were better.

[00:36:59] **HOWARD:** That's interesting, that pride of work stuff.

[00:37:00] **ASHER:** There's a lot of pride of work on the West Coast. The West Coast never lost a ship during World War II because of shifting cargo. That's a fact. They never lost a ship. The East Coast, they did. The cargo would be poorly stowed; the cargo would shift and cause a ship to break up or something like that. But that never happened on the West Coast. There was a great deal of pride.

You had to admire those old longshoremen. They knew their stuff. They could bring out a sheer—they knew how to do everything. They were just really fine workers and highly skilled winch drivers.

[00:37:46] **HOWARD:** Let me ask you a question about this. I hadn't thought about this pride of work thing actually in some ways undermining union solidarity.

[00:37:55] **ASHER:** Not really.

[00:37:56] **HOWARD:** No?

[00:37:59] **ASHER:** Uh-uh. It just was work competition. It wasn't competition to get the approval of the boss.

[00:38:05] **HOWARD:** It wasn't?

[00:38:05] **ASHER:** No. If they had a bad boss that they hated, they still worked that way. If they were working for a walking boss, like "the Gorilla," who'd been a scab for Matson during the 1934 strike, they'd still work that way. Most of them hated him. No, it was a pride of work.

[00:38:32] **HOWARD:** Among the men, then, themselves.

[00:38:33] **ASHER:** Yes, and it came—the Swedes and the Finns had the most of it.

[00:38:42] **HOWARD:** Was there a higher percentage of ex-sailors among the Swedes and the Finns?

[00:38:45] **ASHER:** Oh yes.

[00:38:45] **HOWARD:** Oh there was?

[00:38:45] **ASHER:** A high percentage of ex-sailors. And, among the Finns, a high percentage of ex-Wobblies.

[00:38:53] **HOWARD:** Is that right?

[00:38:53] **ASHER:** Oh, yes.

[00:38:55] **HOWARD:** But not so much the Swedes?

[00:38:56] **ASHER:** No, not so much the Swedes.

[00:38:58] **HOWARD:** Why do you think that was?

[00:38:59] **ASHER:** Then you had a lot of Yugoslavs, too.

[00:39:01] **HOWARD:** In this port? I didn't know that. I knew you did in Pedro.

[00:39:04] **ASHER:** And you had some Blacks before the '34 strike. Then during World War II, a lot of Blacks

came in.

[00:39:11] **HOWARD:** Now who else came in during World War II, with you, for instance? What kinds of people? What kinds of backgrounds—racially, politically if you know it, industrially?

[00:39:23] **ASHER:** Quite a few radicals went in. Radicals have always tried to get into the ILWU, if they were radically inclined. Well, they admired the union. It's an admirable union, even now. Though it is not the union it used to be. Then when the books were opened up in 1959, who came in? A lot of CP-ers, ex-CP-ers.

[00:39:52] **HOWARD:** The RU [Revolutionary Union, part of the Revolutionary Communist Party] sent some people in, I know that.

[00:39:54] **ASHER:** Socialists. Social Democrats. All kinds of people came in.

[00:40:00] **HOWARD:** What kinds of radicals came in, besides you?

[00:40:03] **ASHER:** When I did?

[00:40:03] **HOWARD:** In '42, your period, during the war?

[00:40:07] **ASHER:** Quite a few people I knew at that time were young guys like me, had been around the CP, and they'd been around Local 6 or Local 2. And they hadn't been able to get into Local 10, which was the top paying union and the best jobs. So then they made that shift from Local 2 to Local 6. A lot of the Local 6 guys who'd been in the CP, or ex-CP members, came in during that period of time. More made the shift at 1959.

[00:40:37] **HOWARD:** And the M and M [Mechanization and Modernization Agreement] .

[00:40:39] **ASHER:** Yeah.

[00:40:41] **HOWARD:** What about the proportion of Blacks? Did that increase much during the war?

[00:40:44] **ASHER:** Oh, yes. Sure.

[00:40:46] **HOWARD:** From what to what, if you had to estimate, what percentages?

[00:40:51] **ASHER:** I would say, by the end of World War II, that maybe a quarter, or even more, maybe a third were Black.

[00:40:59] **HOWARD:** And before World War II?

[00:41:01] **ASHER:** Before World War II, there were only a few Black gangs. They worked mostly on Pier 29. They were the old timers. And, boy, they used to take off against the Blacks coming from the Southern states.

[00:41:18] **HOWARD:** In what respect?

[00:41:20] **ASHER:** They didn't consider them a particularly good addition to the union.

[00:41:26] **HOWARD:** The Black people didn't? The old time Black people?

[00:41:28] **ASHER:** No, there was conflict between them.

[00:41:29] **HOWARD:** Why?



[00:41:32] **ASHER:** Well, why is there conflict now between Blacks that have higher positions in society and Blacks that are still down on the bottom? There is conflict now.

[00:41:42] **HOWARD:** Sure, sure.

[00:41:42] **ASHER:** They consider themselves better.

[00:41:44] **HOWARD:** Those are class differences, I would say.

[00:41:46] **ASHER:** Yeah, these skilled longshoremen, they looked upon these people with their crude manners and so forth, and talking Southern dialects—they considered them to a certain extent lowering the image.

[00:42:04] **HOWARD:** Ok.

[00:42:07] **ASHER:** The standard that they had set, you see? And there was something to it. I thought it was ridiculous, and it was divisive. But that didn't last long. That was a very temporary thing.

[00:42:23] **HOWARD:** What about the other white people, were they hostile towards the incoming Blacks?

[00:42:27] **ASHER:** Oh, yes. There was a lot of prejudice.

[00:42:32] **HOWARD:** How did that manifest itself?

[00:42:33] **ASHER:** You see, the conflict between the Blacks that had been here and the Blacks that hadn't was not an overt thing. It was just little snide remarks, stuff like that. Sometimes the old timers would make them in front of other people or to the individual.

The race prejudices of the whites was a different thing. They called them all sorts of racists names and so forth—but not to their face. After a few fights, they got over that. They decided it wasn't very wise. Some of the whites that been from the South especially, they resented them coming out here and taking jobs that should belong to white men.

[00:43:20] **HOWARD:** Where were the Blacks from predominantly?

[00:43:23] **ASHER:** Most of them came from the South.

[00:43:25] **HOWARD:** Do you know which ports? Or which areas

[00:43:27] **ASHER:** During World War II, there were submarines in the Gulf.

[00:43:35] **HOWARD:** I didn't know that. Is that right?

[00:43:37] **ASHER:** Oh many, many ships were sunk out of the Gulf ports. They couldn't operate at full capacity. So the longshoremen there were recruited to come here. That was part of it. Those were already skilled longshoremen. They were pretty well received. But then there was recruits from all over. People went and recruited. They advertised in newspapers and so forth to get people to the shipyards and then get people into longshore. Didn't advertise so much for longshore, but then guys would come out to work in the shipyards, and they'd meet people in longshore. They would leave shipyards and come to work in longshore.

[00:44:18] **HOWARD:** I heard that the unions were very racist in the shipyard industry, too. That was one of the reasons they got shunted over to longshore.

[00:44:23] **ASHER:** That's right. They saw this was a better job. There were already Blacks there, and it's a democratic union. It was a good union for a Black person to join, and still is. And still is.

[00:44:38] **HOWARD:** Do you think that Local 10 was exemplary in the kinds of policies they instituted around hiring Blacks?

[00:44:44] **ASHER:** I think so. See, that is a belated manifestation of the influence of the Wobblies.

[00:44:53] **HOWARD:** You think so? Rather than Bridges?

[00:44:55] **ASHER:** And ILWU. Well, first people accuse Bridges of being prejudiced since he was from Australia and so forth, but I don't think there's any evidence. [pause] Though I've heard people say it, but that's just a . . .

[00:45:14] **HOWARD:** Let me ask you about the whole question of class collaboration during the war and the Party's role in that. Is that how you characterize the CP's performance during the war, as one of class collaboration?

[00:45:26] **ASHER:** Blatant. The worst.

[00:45:29] **HOWARD:** Why don't you elaborate that if you can? Especially in reference to the—

[00:45:33] **ASHER:** You've read Labor's Giant Step, haven't you?

[00:45:35] **HOWARD:** Yeah.

[00:45:38] **ASHER:** Here you had a radical union, and I myself was involved in number of attempts to carry on a radical tradition during World War II. Not kowtow to the military, and so forth. Where they would try to search us or keep us from carrying lunchboxes on board ships and so forth. Every ship they would have Marines—at a Navy base, they would have Marines. They'd have MPs [military police] here at the gangplank. At the shipyard up in Mare Island [Vallejo, California], they instituted a policy there that you couldn't take a lunchbox aboard ship. Well, those ships were way out the end of long finger piers, and it was a long walk even to get your lunchbox which was supposed to be left at the head of the pier or to go out to a lunchroom. People would bring their lunches and their coffee and all that sort of thing.

I was in a gang one time that went up there. They said, "You have to leave your lunchboxes here." We looked—the ship's way out at the end of the pier. A couple of guys actually put their lunchboxes in these little cubicles they provided for them. But then, our winch driver, a big Swede, he said, "Not me." And his partner spoke up; he said, "Not me, either. I'm going to take my lunchbox aboard." The office in charge said, "You can't do that." Marine sergeant said, "You can't do that. I'm sorry, you have to leave it here." "Ok, call the bus. Let's go back to San Francisco." Turned to the boss and said, "Get a replacement." Boss said, "You know I can't get a replacement." It was Sunday, by the way. "It's Sunday! You know goddamn well the hall closes at 10 o'clock. I can't get a replacement." "Well, I don't care. I'm not going to work."

Jesus, the activity that took place. Guy got on the telephone and called. In a few minutes, there was all sorts of brass down there arguing with the walking boss, with the boss, and with the two winch drivers. They stood fast, and they said, "Nothing doing. Call the bus." And all the guys crowded around, they said, "Yep, we're with them. Call the bus. We'll go back to San Francisco." And they wanted the ship to sail. It was the sailing day.

After about an hour of arguing back and forth, threatening us and so forth with all sorts of things. One guy raised the question of brig—"Son, you can't put us in brig; we're civilians." Finally they caved in.

[00:48:34] **HOWARD:** They did?

[00:48:34] **ASHER:** They said, “Ok, you can take them.” That broke that. They never tried it again.

During World War II, that was quite a stand. Which illustrates the background of that union—that they had guys who didn’t kowtow.

Of course, I was thrilled by the whole thing. It was a manifestation of the independence of those workers who would stand up to the authorities. I thought it was great.

[00:49:04] **HOWARD:** Were you an open member of the SWP [Socialist Workers Party] ? Or, how did that work?

[00:49:09] **ASHER:** For one thing, I’d been a well-known member of Local 10, served on strike committees and so forth, and was editor of the strike bulletin in the big strike that took place right before the war and extended to a period after the war had already begun. So when I went down on the waterfront, I didn’t advertise my affiliations. I was known as a Trotskyite in that union.

[00:49:41] **HOWARD:** You were, later on?

[00:49:42] **ASHER:** Yeah, I was known as a Trotskyist in Local 30.

[00:49:46] **HOWARD:** What’s Local 30?

[00:49:47] **ASHER:** Waiters’ union. Waiters and countermen. I was primarily a counterman. Fry cook, stuff like that. I didn’t advertise my politics at all. For one thing, I was a Trotskyist! And Trotskyists are anathema to members of the Communist Party, as you well know. If I had advertised it, I doubt if I would have been accepted into the union. I kept my mouth shut for one-and-one-half years, and that was difficult.

[00:50:21] **HOWARD:** Until what time?

[00:50:23] **ASHER:** Till I got my book. Once I got my full book, I was no longer on probation. Then I began to talk to guys. Before that, I kept my mouth shut.

[00:50:37] **HOWARD:** What about during the war? Did you participate in other kinds of work stoppages or symbolic acts of resistance or whatever?

[00:50:48] **ASHER:** Yes on the question of load limits.

[00:50:50] **HOWARD:** Did you?

[00:50:50] **ASHER:** Oh sure.

[00:50:50] **HOWARD:** Why don’t you tell me about that?

[00:50:53] **ASHER:** There was one time we were loading cement down at Redwood City [Redwood City, California] , as I remember. I remember it was a cement ship, and there was a load limit—I can’t remember. I’d have to go back to the old contracts. There was a load limit. They increased by, oh my god, they must have increased it by 50 percent. Those loads would come in, and they were so heavy, you could hardly move them. We stopped work. We said, “We won’t handle these loads.” They sent down an arbitrator. Let’s see, this is written out somewhere in some arbitration.

[00:51:33] **HOWARD:** Yeah, I'd love to see it. They had a beef like that in Pedro. I didn't know they had one up here over cement.

[00:51:42] **ASHER:** They had one here, too. Anyway, they sent down an arbitrator. I know that they cut back the load of cement. I can't remember the exact details about how it happened, but I remember we stopped work. The whole ship stopped work until it was settled.

[00:51:59] **HOWARD:** Did you play a principal role in initiating that?

[00:52:04] **ASHER:** No, I didn't. I didn't play a principal role in initiating any of those things when I was on probation.

[00:52:10] **HOWARD:** Oh, you were still on probation after you got into Local 10. Is that what you're saying?

[00:52:13] **ASHER:** I was on probation, sure. For a year-and-a-half.

[00:52:16] **HOWARD:** You got your book in Local 6.

[00:52:18] **ASHER:** I got my book in Local 6. As soon as I got my book, I transferred to Local 10. Then I went back on probation again—

[00:52:23] **HOWARD:** Oh, I didn't realize you went back on probation in Local 10.

[00:52:25] **ASHER:** I went back on probation for another year-and-a-half.

[00:52:28] **HOWARD:** Ok.

[00:52:29] **ASHER:** Before I got my book.

[00:52:32] **HOWARD:** Yeah, alright.

[00:52:32] **ASHER:** And I played it real cool. I didn't want the employers to get an idea that I was a radical. I didn't want the leadership of the union to get the idea that I was a Trotskyist. It might have interfered with my getting a book.

[00:52:52] **HOWARD:** Sure, yeah.

[00:52:55] **ASHER:** Therefore, I was very careful. I was opposed to the war—the union, though, was in favor of the war. I was opposed to the war, politically.

[00:53:04] **HOWARD:** Ok, what was the consensus of the men?

[00:53:08] **ASHER:** Well, that changed. At the beginning of the war, there was a big euphoria about it. "We are gonna smash Hitler." [scraping noise over audio] But, actually, that didn't last too long. It lasted about a year and a half. The war began in 1941, right? December 7, 1941. By '43, a great deal of that had dissipated because we started out in the war with a wage rate of \$1.10/hour. In 1944, we were still making \$1.10/hour. Then we got a nickel raise. Meanwhile the cost of living had gone up maybe 30-40 percent.

[00:53:59] **HOWARD:** So that would express itself in less support for the war?

[00:54:03] **ASHER:** Certainly.

[00:54:04] **HOWARD:** How so? I don't see that connection.

[00:54:06] **ASHER:** Well, at the same time, the corporations—and everybody knew it—were making enormous profits. And then, people were dying. Many men on the waterfront that I knew had a son killed. They would take it very hard, and they would begin to wonder, was it worth it? Here's these employers—they're making these super-profits. Even the AF of L [American Federation of Labor] and the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] were coming out and propagandizing this. They were saying, "This is what's happening—the workers are paying for the war. They're fighting the war, and the corporations are getting rich."

[00:54:39] **HOWARD:** What about the working conditions themselves? Did they deteriorate much during the war, or did they improve?

[00:54:44] **ASHER:** This is one union where they didn't deteriorate too much. This is a union that had just come out of two strikes, had a very militant rank-and-file. They weren't about to work themselves to death. Actually they were making money. They were making it, though, by long hours. I myself had worked one time in Pier 56—we were loading mail on a Navy ship—I went to work at 7 o'clock in the morning. Had lunch, came back, sent us to supper at 6, came back, worked till midnight. Sent us to midnight lunch, came back, worked till 7 o'clock in the morning.

[00:55:24] **HOWARD:** Twenty-four hours?

[00:55:26] **ASHER:** Well, it isn't twenty-four.

[00:55:27] **HOWARD:** Twelve, right?

[00:55:28] **ASHER:** Twenty-four less three.

[00:55:33] **HOWARD:** Because you did your three hours of eating, you mean?

[00:55:35] **ASHER:** Twenty-one hours.

[00:55:36] **HOWARD:** Wow. Was it mandatory or not? Because that's a big difference then.

[00:55:43] **ASHER:** You could refuse to work.

[00:55:45] **HOWARD:** You're just being a labor aristocrat over here. [laugh]

[00:55:46] **ASHER:** But this was towards the beginning of the war. There was such pressure to win this war, to get those supplies going, to get that mail over to our boys and so forth. If you had raised any hell about it, you would have been looked at as sort of a halfway traitor.

What happened there—we worked until 7 o'clock in the morning, and then the boss said, "Ok, guys, come on up and go get some breakfast. I can't get another gang, and we gotta finish the ship." We all looked at each other. We were so tired, we could hardly stand up. Not that we hadn't slept—guys would cover, and a couple guys would go and flake out. The other six guys would work and so forth. We got a little sleep, but very damn little. And we'd been on our feet for a long, long time. We looked at each other, and one guy said, "Not me." Another guy said, "Not me." Then we all looked around, and we all said, "I'm with you." So, the gang steward, who usually was the spokesperson, he yelled at the boss, "Sorry, boss, we're going home." "But you can't go home!" "Sorry, boss, we're going home. We're tired." We all went to the ladder, went up the ladder, and we went home. That was the end of it. They didn't try to stop us. That was the longest I ever worked in my life.

[00:57:19] **HOWARD:** Yeah, I can imagine that's—

[00:57:20] **ASHER:** I never did. We used to work 11, 12 hours, 14 hours. That wasn't very unusual. And you had to be pretty young and strong to take it. But those old longshoremen, I tell you, they were a tough breed.

[00:57:34] **HOWARD:** Let me ask you a question about this. How would you characterize Bridges' position regarding the war? Let me get into it that way. Was he a collaborationist?

[00:57:45] **ASHER:** Of course.

[00:57:48] **HOWARD:** And the leadership of the union was collaborationist.

[00:57:50] **ASHER:** By and large.

[00:57:51] **HOWARD:** And yet the working conditions themselves did not suffer as a result of that.

[00:57:55] **ASHER:** That was the men.

[00:57:56] **HOWARD:** That was because of the men?

[00:57:58] **ASHER:** The men.

[00:57:59] **HOWARD:** Or was the union talking out of both sides of their mouth?

[00:58:02] **ASHER:** No, that was the men.

[00:58:03] **HOWARD:** You're sure of that?

[00:58:04] **ASHER:** Sure. Even in the case of the—you go back and you look up that case of the cement.

[00:58:09] **HOWARD:** Now, you know, that's what triggered it. Because I've looked at the arbitration of the cement case—it may have been here, but I thought it was L.A. The position that comes across clearly is that the union's not going to budge on that. They fight the employers on every one of those givebacks that the employers want.

So while the union's talking about the all-out prosecution of the war effort, they're not willing to give an inch on working conditions. So, [pause] I'm thinking—

[00:58:37] **ASHER:** Leadership is bound to a certain extent by the circumstances in which they find themselves vis-à-vis the union membership. If they want to stay in leadership, they can't just turn the membership over to the mercies of the boss. Nationally, Bridges had some of the worst positions for drafting the strikers, and everything like that—you're probably familiar with it.

[00:59:01] **HOWARD:** Yeah, I am.

[00:59:01] **ASHER:** He had some of the very worst positions. The Communist Party was jingoist. There was a contradiction in the ILWU, which was one of the most radical unions with the most radical membership. The union defended the right of foreign-born people, Japanese and so forth—of course, they took the Japanese away, but the Italians—to work on the waterfront when they tried to exclude them. You knew that?

[00:59:33] **HOWARD:** Yeah, I did know that.

[00:59:34] **ASHER:** I was in one gang where that happened. They tried to stop this guy—he wasn't a citizen, an

Italian. They tried to stop him from coming aboard the ship.

[00:59:44] **HOWARD:** The union did?

[00:59:44] **ASHER:** No, no.

[00:59:45] **HOWARD:** No, yeah, the employers.

[00:59:46] **ASHER:** The employers. Not the employers—the military.

[00:59:49] **HOWARD:** Oh, the military, ok.

[00:59:51] **ASHER:** The gang stopped right behind him. They said, “If you don’t go aboard, we don’t go aboard.”

[00:59:55] **HOWARD:** Why did the gang do that?

[00:59:57] **ASHER:** Why did the gang do it? Because he was an old timer! He just hadn’t got his citizenship, and everybody knew him. His name was Luigi something-or-other.

[01:00:04] **HOWARD:** So it wasn’t like a principled stand against racism or something as much as—

[01:00:08] **ASHER:** No! They said, “He’s an Italian, he’s born alien. Not an American citizen.” We said, “We don’t give a damn. He’s a member of the union.” They took stands like that. There were a lot of individual stands. Some of them went to arbitration. I’m not sure about that; you’d have to go back through the arbitration records.

No, there is a contradiction there, I admit.

[01:00:34] **HOWARD:** Yeah.

[01:00:36] **ASHER:** No matter what their political line is. Jingoist at—

[BEGINNING OF PART]

[01:00:42] **HOWARD:** Anyway, I was just asking about—

[01:00:43] **ASHER:** I don’t think that the ILWU is typical.

[01:00:45] **HOWARD:** You don’t?

[01:00:46] **ASHER:** No. The ILWU is exceptional. Because in the other industries, like the UE [United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America] and [pause] well, the CP had some influence in the UE and the UAW [United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America] at that time, but it shared it with other people who were very much for the war. In the major producing industries, the pressure was tremendous, and they gave up a lot of conditions. Everybody that worked in that industry knows that they gave up conditions. It was quite different than the ILWU.

[01:01:27] **HOWARD:** And you think the difference was primarily because the rank-and-file simply wouldn’t let them give it up, is that right?

[01:01:34] **ASHER:** Well, they didn’t give up anything in the UAW either. See, the UAW was another union that came out of strikes. There’s a big difference in the unions that came out of big strikes and had educated

membership in struggling with employers and the unions that were sort of created, like the steelworkers' union. The steelworkers' union had some big strikes later on, but it was a union that was really brought into being by a deal between employers and the organizing committee, which was mostly led by people out of the United Mine Workers. United Mine Workers didn't give up conditions out of World War II. Now, there's an analogy for the ILWU.

[01:02:14] **HOWARD:** Yeah.

[01:02:15] **ASHER:** They gave up damn little, and they struck during the war, three times.

[01:02:18] **HOWARD:** Right, exactly. That's an interesting point if it's true.

[01:02:23] **ASHER:** That's a better analogy. Because, in many other areas where the CP was dominant—UE is a prime example—they lost conditions.

[01:02:34] **HOWARD:** What did they lose? Because I've studied the UE, and I can't see that they lost a whole lot.

[01:02:38] **ASHER:** You can't?

[01:02:38] **HOWARD:** No. Can you remember any specifics?

[01:02:41] **ASHER:** I'd have to go back. There are books on the UE.

[01:02:45] **HOWARD:** Everyone mentioned accepting incentive pay, piecework, but it turns out that had all been institutionalized well before the war. It was a way for the UE to get around the Little Steel [strike by the UE] formula for price increases because they instituted incentive pay. If you were so motivated, you could get a higher wage rate by working a little harder. But it was purely voluntary; there was nobody standing over your shoulder with a whip.

[01:03:06] **ASHER:** But then—

[01:03:09] **HOWARD:** See, I admit the rhetoric—at the level of official rhetoric, there's no question it's outright collaboration, as it is with most union leaders during the war. What I'm trying to see is if it had any impact on the shop floor. You're telling me the ILWU, the union I know best, was exceptional. Maybe it was.

[01:03:22] **ASHER:** I think it was. Even in the ILWU, we lost things.

[01:03:28] **HOWARD:** Like what?

[01:03:29] **ASHER:** We lost things like—we lost some load limits, not very many. We lost the fact that we had work six long hours, and we had no recourse because of decisions made by the [National] War Labor Board and so forth. That was a loss. You know, I have all sorts of notes going back through this.

[01:03:54] **HOWARD:** I would love to see that stuff sometime.

[01:03:57] **ASHER:** I've been trying to put them together, but I'm really not a good research person. I have a great deal of difficulty. Because I have all sorts of notes—things that happened to me, things I saw and so forth. They're usually in the back of my time book. Well, I have the time books.

[01:04:15] **HOWARD:** That's a valuable source!



[01:04:16] **ASHER:** I have notes on union meetings, what happened, who said what, all sorts of things like that.

[01:04:22] **HOWARD:** John—I forget his name. He works for the radical bookstore up here. He said you had an incredible collection of old papers and stuff like that.

[01:04:30] **ASHER:** I've been negotiating with the Bancroft Library. The assistant curator, he came over and he spent a day in my basement.

[01:04:39] **HOWARD:** Did he really?

[01:04:41] **ASHER:** What I'm going to do—I'm going to give it to them.

[01:04:45] **HOWARD:** All right. That's very generous.

[01:04:47] **ASHER:** Take it off my income tax.

[01:04:49] **HOWARD:** Good.

[01:04:50] **ASHER:** Well, it will be better for them to have it. I really don't know how to organize it.

[01:04:53] **HOWARD:** Yeah, I don't blame you.

[01:04:54] **ASHER:** I tried. I spent about two years trying to get all the stuff I have in the basement organized, and I can't do it. I have a lot of it organized in the back room, but it's just an impossible job. Because I've saved everything.

[01:05:05] **HOWARD:** You have? Wow. Could I take a look at that at some point? Or would that be difficult?

[01:05:11] **ASHER:** No, you'd have to come some time when you would want to spend some time.

[01:05:15] **HOWARD:** Yeah, ok. Let's talk about that later. Ok, so you said the ILWU lost sling load limits? Some of them.

[01:05:22] **ASHER:** Some of them.

[01:05:24] **HOWARD:** I'm not sure if that's true, to be honest, but I could look into it.

[01:05:28] **ASHER:** Wait a minute now—it didn't lose them through an agreement.

[01:05:31] **HOWARD:** It lost them through the War Labor Board?

[01:05:38] **ASHER:** It lost them through—you go to the army, and they would have loads made up. On boards. The army was the first one to introduce the lift truck and the lift boards, which were already loaded and came in from various bases. Navy bases, Army bases, and so forth. Fully loaded.

[01:05:57] **HOWARD:** That was military cargo, though, right?

[01:05:58] **ASHER:** Military cargo. You took the load the way it was.

[01:06:01] **HOWARD:** What portion of the cargo was military, incidentally? I imagine most of it was, right?

[01:06:05] **ASHER:** Most of it.

[01:06:06] **HOWARD:** Yeah.

[01:06:07] **ASHER:** The international trade just went to pieces.

[01:06:09] **HOWARD:** But that's a very different impression than consciously the union leaders selling out the rank-and-file. Here you've got the military, the predominant institution in society—

[01:06:17] **ASHER:** You've got a point here. They sold them out politically.

[01:06:20] **HOWARD:** Yeah.

[01:06:22] **ASHER:** They sold them out politically, which made it more difficult in the post-war period to fight.

[01:06:27] **HOWARD:** Maybe. Maybe. See, that's what I'm wondering. I don't know what you mean by selling them out politically. What do you mean by that?

[01:06:34] **ASHER:** They agreed to a war which was not in the interest of the workers.

[01:06:37] **HOWARD:** Ok, that's the biggest—

[01:06:38] **ASHER:** And supported that war.

[01:06:39] **HOWARD:** But the vast majority of workers I don't think saw it that way, did they? I mean, they wanted to fight Hitler and—

[01:06:42] **ASHER:** Not in the beginning. As I started to say, within a year-and-a-half, two years. For instance, take the experience of the Socialist Workers Party, which was indicted. 18 of our leaders went to jail. They suppressed *The Militant*. We had a big fight to get back our mailing rights. We had a policy of what we called "caution." We were all, most of us, working in war industries. I would say 90 percent of the organization were working, or else they were in the Army like the rest of the population. We had a policy of caution, and that meant that you were careful with what you said and what you did. That you wanted to be there when the war ended. You wanted to still be in industry, and you wanted to be in a position to influence the workers and the strikes that we knew would follow World War II.

[01:07:36] **HOWARD:** What about Farrell Dobbs [American Trotskyist and trade unionist] ? Remember what he did around this time?

[01:07:38] **ASHER:** He was in jail.

[01:07:39] **HOWARD:** I guess he was in jail, but, before that, he took a very strong line against American involvement in the war and resigned from the union. Isn't that what happened? Or kicked out or something?

[01:07:47] **ASHER:** He got kicked out. He resigned from the union.

[01:07:50] **HOWARD:** I thought he did.

[01:07:51] **ASHER:** But he resigned before the war.

[01:07:53] **HOWARD:** Yeah, '40 or something like that.

[01:07:54] **ASHER:** Yeah, yeah. Before the war.

[01:07:55] **HOWARD:** Then the indictments came down.

[01:07:56] **ASHER:** Then the indictments came down. We took a very strong stance politically in our paper against the war. Insofar as being on the job, we also, with individuals we felt we had some rapport with, we would talk. But as far as getting up on the union floor and taking what we would consider a ultra-left position—not an ultra-left position, but an ultra-left type of action—to get up before a union that supports the war 98 percent, and so on and so forth, and get up and denounce the war. It's crazy.

[01:08:29] **HOWARD:** Sure.

[01:08:30] **ASHER:** It's nuts.

[01:08:30] **HOWARD:** Yeah.

[01:08:33] **ASHER:** We wouldn't do a thing like that. We knew eventually that the workers would get tired of the war, and we knew that after World War II, because the cost of living was going up, and the workers' wages were virtually frozen—the ones that broke that were the miners. The miners' strike broke that wage freeze.

[01:08:53] **HOWARD:** Was there any organized opposition in Local 10, for instance, to the policies of the union? Were leaflets handed out during the war?

[01:09:02] **ASHER:** Not really. I think the only ones that did that were the [?Shachlonites?] [perhaps referring to Shachtmanism of Max Shachtman, pro-Stalin] .

[01:09:04] **HOWARD:** The [?Shachlonites?] ? They were here in Local 10

[01:09:07] **ASHER:** No, they weren't here. I think there was one here. They were down in San Pedro.

[01:09:13] **HOWARD:** Yeah, I know that.

[01:09:16] **ASHER:** I think some of them got thrown out, didn't they?

[01:09:18] **HOWARD:** May have.

[01:09:19] **ASHER:** I think so.

[01:09:19] **HOWARD:** Stan may have been in on that, right? Stan Weir?

[01:09:25] **ASHER:** He didn't come into longshore until later, though. He came in the '59 draft.

[01:09:30] **HOWARD:** That's right, yeah. Ok.

[01:09:37] **ASHER:** I don't remember anything like that. We ran a candidate, though. During the war, we didn't run any national candidates. Not until 1948 did we first run a national candidate. But we sold our newspaper.

[01:09:55] **HOWARD:** You did?

[01:09:56] **ASHER:** Oh yes.

[01:09:56] **HOWARD:** During the war?

[01:09:56] **ASHER:** Sure.

[01:09:57] **HOWARD:** In front of Local 10?

[01:09:58] **ASHER:** No.

[01:10:01] **HOWARD:** Just on the streets, neighborhoods?

[01:10:02] **ASHER:** On the street and so forth. I don't remember whether we sold in front of Local 10 or not; we might have.

[01:10:08] **HOWARD:** I guess what I'm trying to get at is, was there any popular opposition, widespread, to the collaboration policies of the ILWU? Mostly with localized job actions.

[01:10:19] **ASHER:** There was talk about it.

[01:10:21] **HOWARD:** There was talk?

[01:10:21] **ASHER:** Oh yes. Because some of the old radicals around and some of the young guys did not support the war. Various degrees. Most of them began to question it because of the wage freeze and corporations getting rich. They began to raise questions. But there wasn't any real popular opposition to the war. There was the beginning of a disillusionment about 1944. For instance, we found by 1944 that the sales of our paper went up. We began to recruit to the party right during the war. 1944 was a big recruitment year!

[01:11:04] **HOWARD:** Which industries, do you know? Or was it industry-based or?

[01:11:07] **ASHER:** Some of it was in the ILWU.

[01:11:09] **HOWARD:** It was?

[01:11:09] **ASHER:** Yeah, a few. In the war industries. Among Blacks, because we were the only radical organization in the United States, except maybe for the [?Shachlonites?] , that took a strong position supporting the March on Washington that was organized.

[01:11:24] **HOWARD:** Is that right?

[01:11:25] **ASHER:** Yeah. We supported that, and every place that the Blacks tried to move to get equality we supported it. And so, we attracted quite a number of Blacks to the movement. At one time the San Francisco branch, about 1944-45, I'd say it was about a third Black.

[01:11:52] **HOWARD:** Could you give me an estimate of about how many members that was? The SF branch?

[01:11:57] **ASHER:** The SF branch, I guess it was around 100.

[01:11:58] **HOWARD:** That's credible.

[01:11:58] **ASHER:** Close, it was wasn't a big branch. Of course, 100 Trotskyists is a pretty sizeable force.

[01:11:58] **HOWARD:** Yeah, especially today. 100 of anything is a sizeable force.

[01:12:24] **ASHER:** The Party started recruiting again in 1944 and recruited right up until the beginning of the McCarthy period. Then we began losing and lost about, I would say, over half the membership during the McCarthy period.

[01:12:47] **HOWARD:** So then the impression I walk away with at this point is growing resistance to American

involvement in the war that peaks around '44—

[01:12:58] **ASHER:** You might call it growing resistance to the price that the workers were paying for involvement in the war.

[01:13:03] **HOWARD:** Ok, right. That is a little different, isn't it. But otherwise, no wide scale opposition to the ILWU policies, and, in fact, the policies didn't change all that much, it sounds like.

[01:13:15] **ASHER:** No, they didn't change that much.

[01:13:17] **HOWARD:** I've even had people tell me that the work became a little easier during the war. The four on, four off thing was adapted during that period. You know that—four on, four off? No?

[01:13:27] **ASHER:** Who said that?

[01:13:28] **HOWARD:** A number of guys in Pedro did.

[01:13:30] **ASHER:** Really?

[01:13:30] **HOWARD:** I don't know if they said it up here or not.

[01:13:33] **ASHER:** That four on, four off came into being after the war. Especially it came into being 1945—it might have started right at the end of the war, '45, '46, '47, '48. That was one of the big issues. After that, even it continued. It was finally put to rest by a decision, in the 1969 contract.

[01:14:03] **HOWARD:** Why did arise after the war? Was it a make-work scheme then, or something?

[01:14:06] **ASHER:** No, you had evolved a highly skilled bunch of men that could meet production standards working harder for a short period of time. You could take a real leisurely pace, and work eight men, or six or seven, or you could work real hard and work four on, four off. And they did it a lot. But only on certain types of cargo.

[01:14:35] **HOWARD:** So the four on, four off, as you remember, if it kicked in with the war, it was the very tail end, right?

[01:14:40] **ASHER:** Must have been the tail end. I don't remember. There was real pressure, especially the first couple years of the war, for everybody to work and produce, to supply the troops.

Must be my son, I think it is. But we'll just continue.

[addressing new person in the room] Hi, Mike!

[01:15:06] **HOWARD:** Hi.

[01:15:06] **MIKE:** What's your name?

[01:15:06] **HOWARD:** Howard.

[01:15:06] **ASHER:** Mike, this is Howard. He's interviewing me on some ILWU history.

[sound of door closing]

[01:15:15] **HOWARD:** Ok, so then we move into the postwar period, and there was a strike in '46, wasn't there?

[01:15:21] **ASHER:** Yeah.

[01:15:22] **HOWARD:** What about that? Do you have any recollections of what was going on there?

[01:15:24] **ASHER:** Sure, I was on strike committee, both strikes. In the '46 strike, I was a steward, and so I was a member as a steward. All the stewards were on the strike committee.

[01:15:37] **HOWARD:** Had you been elected in the steward position?

[01:15:39] **ASHER:** Oh, sure.

[01:15:40] **HOWARD:** What was the basis of being elected?

[01:15:44] **ASHER:** The gang, which was an 18-person gang at that time, would select a person they figured was a good spokesperson and would stick up for conditions and wasn't afraid to talk to bosses.

[01:15:54] **HOWARD:** So you already had that reputation by '46?

[01:15:55] **ASHER:** Oh, yeah, I had got it even during the war to a certain extent, after I got my book.

[01:15:59] **HOWARD:** Even though you had to be quiet for a while, right?

[01:16:02] **ASHER:** After I got my book, I started speaking out on conditions and everything.

[01:16:07] **HOWARD:** Were you open SWP at that time or not?

[01:16:10] **ASHER:** No. Not till after the war was over.

[01:16:13] **HOWARD:** Ok.

[01:16:14] **ASHER:** It wouldn't have been wise.

[01:16:15] **HOWARD:** Right.

[01:16:16] **ASHER:** Some people knew I was an SWP-er because some of the people I talked to I brought to meetings. Sold them a copy of *The Militant*, quietly.

[01:16:27] **HOWARD:** Ok, so tell me about the '46 strike.

[01:16:29] **ASHER:** The '46 strike was half a strike. It was a coalition of a whole big group of unions on both coasts. The NMU [National Maritime Union] was involved on the West Coast. I have good documentation. They made an error that they did not make in 1948. They excluded from the strike military cargo, military ships, and so forth. And I think they excluded also some other types of cargo, too. And because of that, and because much of the cargo right after World War II was moving back and forth in Army ships or ships that were leased by the army, that just took the guts right out of the strike. The strike won a little bit, but it didn't win anything like it should have.

[01:17:36] **HOWARD:** So they didn't strike military cargo then.

[01:17:40] **ASHER:** No, in 1946, no. We worked all during that strike. You wouldn't work five days, but you'd

work two days at the Navy and maybe the next day you'd work three days at the Army. Guys were working.

[01:17:56] **HOWARD:** Was it a strike basically over wages? I don't remember.

[01:17:59] **ASHER:** Basically over wages.

[01:18:00] **HOWARD:** Yeah, to recoup what they'd lost during the war.

[01:18:02] **ASHER:** Basically over wages. And some wage gains were made, but they weren't very important. The big strike was 1948.

[01:18:09] **HOWARD:** Alright, let's talk about that.

[01:18:10] **ASHER:** The big strike in 1948, I was on the strike committee. I was on the central strike committee. That was a strike where, right from the beginning, "we're going to strike everything." Which was a correct policy. They had a rank-and-file strike committee of about 100 men, of which I was one, which carried out the strike in a very militant fashion. We picketed the Army and the Navy. We virtually closed down Fort Mason, where the troop ships used to come in. They brought scabs in, not very many. They brought some scabs into the Army base, also not very many. Well, there's a behind-the-scenes story there that I wouldn't want on tape.

[01:19:00] **HOWARD:** Want me to go off?

[01:19:01] **ASHER:** Yeah, go off.

[BREAK IN RECORDING OF INTERVIEW]

The Army set up a recruitment office—by the way, I've written a story about this.

[01:19:07] **HOWARD:** Oh, I'd like to see it.

[01:19:08] **ASHER:** A short story that never got published.

[01:19:10] **HOWARD:** Oh, I see.

[01:19:10] **ASHER:** They set up a recruitment office at Fort Mason [San Francisco Port of Embarkation, U.S. Army base]. They advertised—high pay, come work in the San Francisco waterfront, that sort of thing. On the day they opened the recruitment office there at Fort Mason, we had 1,000 pickets on that.

[01:19:30] **HOWARD:** Is that right?

[01:19:30] **ASHER:** We had 10,000 men in the union at that time. 1,000 of them were assigned to picket Fort Mason. Others just came down; if they weren't on picket duty that day, they came down to help. We must have had 1,500 men there, I guess, all ready to fight.

[01:19:53] **HOWARD:** Now this was to work military cargo, right?

[01:19:55] **ASHER:** Yeah.

[01:19:55] **HOWARD:** They were recruiting scabs for that. I didn't even know that they tried to do that.

[01:19:58] **ASHER:** Oh yes.

[01:19:59] **HOWARD:** They did?

[01:19:59] **ASHER:** Oh sure. You can go back and read the newspapers about it.

[01:20:03] **HOWARD:** What proportion of the cargo was military by 1948?

[01:20:06] **ASHER:** I don't know.

[01:20:07] **HOWARD:** Was it a significant chunk?

[01:20:08] **ASHER:** Yeah, it was significant.

[01:20:10] **HOWARD:** Maybe a fourth or something like that?

[01:20:12] **ASHER:** I don't know if it was that much. Maybe it was less than that; maybe it was a fifth, sixth.

[01:20:19] **HOWARD:** Ok, but it was still sizeable—

[01:20:20] **ASHER:** World trade had revived. It was a burgeoning period of world trade.

[01:20:26] **HOWARD:** So that was a threat to the success of the strike, then, if they were able to work military cargo.

[01:20:35] **ASHER:** To win a strike, you have to have what is called a "tight strike." Because transportation is different than at a manufacturing plant. Transportation is also a surplus value-producing industry; it sells a commodity. The commodity is change of place—that's taken up in the third volume of Capital [Capital: A Critique of Political Economy by Marx] , if you want to check it out. It's change of place—that's a commodity that sells.

[01:21:02] **HOWARD:** He actually says it generates surplus value?

[01:21:04] **ASHER:** Certainly. You sell a commodity. The commodity is change of place. Because you take something that is produced here and would sell on the market, if it were sold outside the factory, for \$1, and you transport it 3,000 miles, that adds value to it.

[01:21:22] **HOWARD:** Yeah.

[01:21:23] **ASHER:** It increases its price.

[01:21:24] **HOWARD:** It's been a long time since I've read that. It seems he makes a lot of contradictory statements about transportation, but maybe you're right.

[01:21:31] **ASHER:** Oh, yes, it's change of place. It's a commodity. It's a commodity-producing area. However, it's like the bloodstream of a society. A big transportation strike—say, all the railroads and longshoremens and Teamsters all went on strike together, they could get anything they wanted. They could shut the whole country down—just transportation alone.

[01:22:02] **HOWARD:** Sure.

[01:22:02] **ASHER:** Shut the country down just like cutting off the blood supply. Well, when you strike in a transportation industry, no matter what it is, you have to understand that basic concept—that you're cutting off the blood supply. You don't want the blood to get through. You want to have a situation where they have to plead



for mercy, “Please! Let me live!” So, the policy of the Trotskyists—and we had some Trotskyists in all ports at that time—was for a tight strike. That was my policy. I used to get up at every strike meeting, and I’d talk about a tight strike! “We gotta close up these holes! You can’t let this and that happen!”

[01:22:46] **HOWARD:** Was anyone arguing for allowing holes to exist?

[01:22:49] **ASHER:** Ooooooh, yes.

[01:22:51] **HOWARD:** On what grounds?

[01:22:52] **ASHER:** On the foreign ships primarily.

[01:22:55] **HOWARD:** Why?

[01:22:56] **ASHER:** Not in the Army. We didn’t have any breaks in that. The only break in that was when some little company set up and began to work Army cargo because they signed the interim union contract. Which wasn’t too bad. There was a break in the employers’ ranks. But on the foreign ships, there was a move to try to work foreign ships, you see. I took a lead and played a leading role for a tight strike, and others did, too.

[01:23:20] **HOWARD:** Why would people be willing to work foreign ships? Because they weren’t as belligerent as the American employers, or. . . ?

[01:23:28] **ASHER:** No, it was the pressure. You see, they were calling the union all sorts of names. We were destroying the economy and so forth. To move a little cargo, you see, to show the goodwill and so forth.

For instance, there was a grain dock over in Alameda [Alameda, California] that signed a contract with the union. The union contract. There were no ships they could work. Then they said, well, a foreign ship—after all, you’re not allowed to strike against the foreign ships. Let a foreign ship come in here and take cargo. And the majority of the union decided no. That would be the first break in the solid front of the strike, and it would be incorrect.

Then I and some of my friends, we produced a document. We went to the library, and we dug up all the connections between the foreign ships and the American ships.

[01:24:34] **HOWARD:** You did?

[01:24:34] **ASHER:** They had interlocking directorates and every other damn thing. Some of the foreign companies were partly owned by some of the American companies and vice versa.

[01:24:42] **HOWARD:** Is that right? That’s a nifty piece of research.

[01:24:44] **ASHER:** And we represented that at the strike committee meeting, and it torpedoed the whole goddamn thing. There was a case of a foreign ship that had started loading grain in Seattle—this will probably be in the Seattle newspapers. I’d have to go up there, or get somebody to do the research for me. They started loading grain, and usually you pour the front of the ship first. They poured the front of the ship. The screw came up out of the water, alongside the dock. The central strike committee here in San Francisco, after this docking was put up and we had a debate on the question, decided to stop loading the ship.

[01:25:27] **HOWARD:** Is that right? [laughing]

[01:25:29] **ASHER:** They sent a telegram, “Stop loading the ship.” It was a foreign ship. The Coast Guard went crazy. “That’s a fire hazard! What if a fire broke out on the dock? The ship couldn’t get away; the screw’s out of

the water. No way it could move. You can't do that."

So, it came back to the strike committee again. "Well, this one time, finish loading the ship." I don't remember who made the motion; I think it was. . . it wasn't me, but it was someone else. Made the motion that we discharge the ship. It passed. The ship was discharged, which cost the employers a lot of money.

[01:26:20] **HOWARD:** I don't understand. Why?

[01:26:21] **ASHER:** They had already put the grain in the ship! Now, instead of finishing loading the ship—

[01:26:25] **HOWARD:** Oh, I see, you took it out.

[01:26:26] **ASHER:** And bringing the screw back down, we unloaded the ship, and that brought the screw back down.

[01:26:32] **HOWARD:** That was clever.

[01:26:35] **ASHER:** Then the ship moved back out in the bay and anchored again.

[01:26:38] **HOWARD:** How many—

[01:26:39] **ASHER:** But that was shortly before the strike was over. When the pressure was really being felt. Then all the sudden, the employers just caved in. They changed the name from the Waterfront Employers to the PMA [Pacific Maritime Association] . They got a new negotiating committee. The union got everything it asked for.

[01:26:58] **HOWARD:** They also got something they didn't ask for, didn't they? They got—

[01:27:02] **ASHER:** Arbitration.

[01:27:03] **HOWARD:** That they would be overseen or whatever. Someone would oversee the validity of the contract, it was arbitration, I guess.

[01:27:10] **ASHER:** Yeah, arbitration.

[01:27:11] **HOWARD:** But they had that before with the Labor Relations Committee. This had more teeth in it or something.

[01:27:14] **ASHER:** They had arbitration before, you see, but that arbitration didn't touch direct job-related things, job actions and so forth.

[01:27:25] **HOWARD:** Is that the difference?

[01:27:26] **ASHER:** Before the 1948 strike, if you had a beef on a ship, and you couldn't get satisfaction with a walking boss—I was in many of these type of things—you would say, "Ok, guys,"—I was usually the steward of the gang I was in— "Ok, guys, come on up. We're going home." And we'd come up, and we'd go by the next hatch. "What's wrong? What're you going home for?" "Well, we had this beef, and the walking boss couldn't agree so we're going home." They'd say, "Well, hey, fellas! This is what happened." Pretty soon, the other gang would come up. Sometimes a whole ship would walk off over a single beef. Right before the '48 strike. That was the whole period before '46 and '48.

[01:28:10] **HOWARD:** Ok, then after '48, it was—

[01:28:12] **ASHER:** After '48, you see, then the union and the employers brought in arbitration and set the arbitration boards, and things began to change.

[01:28:23] **HOWARD:** And that made it—

[01:28:24] **ASHER:** Very difficult to hold onto your conditions and to . . .

[01:28:31] **HOWARD:** But you were supposed to do that before '48, weren't you? You weren't supposed to be doing walkouts like that.

[01:28:35] **ASHER:** No. But they always did them.

[01:28:38] **HOWARD:** I think what the difference was that the northern California CIO agreed to stand behind the contract the ILWU signed—

[01:28:44] **ASHER:** I don't remember.

[01:28:45] **HOWARD:** I don't know if that made any difference or not, but they argued that that was a big deal. It was underwritten by the CIO.

[01:28:50] **ASHER:** Mm-hmm, maybe.

[01:28:52] **HOWARD:** Because the employers said they couldn't trust the ILWU or something.

[01:28:56] **ASHER:** All this I've never written down. It's just in my memory.

[01:28:59] **HOWARD:** Have you read Charles Larrowe, the Harry Bridges biography that he's done?

[01:29:03] **ASHER:** Oh yes.

[01:29:04] **HOWARD:** He's got pretty good coverage of the '48 strike in there, I think.

[01:29:08] **ASHER:** In one of our publications, there's an article by a guy named Harris, who's also a longshoreman, a review of that book.

[01:29:18] **HOWARD:** Ed Harris, right? I think I have read that.

[01:29:20] **ASHER:** You have read it?

[01:29:21] **HOWARD:** I think so.

[01:29:22] **ASHER:** It's a review of that book.

[01:29:23] **HOWARD:** Yeah, I did read it.

[01:29:24] **ASHER:** It's in the International Socialist Review or something like that.

[01:29:27] **HOWARD:** How about a guy named [?Al Burton?] ? Does that name mean anything?

[01:29:30] **ASHER:** [?Al Burton?] ? No.

[01:29:31] **HOWARD:** Almost positive he wrote a real fine Trotskyist critique of Bridges' collaboration during the war. I think that's the name. I'll try and dig it up.

[01:29:40] **ASHER:** [?Al Burton?] That's a guy over in Oakland. Who wrote a thing on work stoppages during World War II.

[01:29:48] **HOWARD:** He did? What's his name? I'd love to find out. Was it Al Burton perhaps?

[01:29:54] **ASHER:** No, no Al Burton.

[01:29:59] **HOWARD:** Was this a longshoreman or a scholar or?

[01:30:01] **ASHER:** No, no, he's a Social Democrat. But he's a hell of a good guy. Part of the material he got from me. I dug into my files and gave him material and talked to him. I think I have a copy of it.

[01:30:19] **HOWARD:** I'd love to see that if you could dig that up.

[01:30:22] **ASHER:** You want to turn this off for a minute?

[01:30:23] **HOWARD:** Alright, sure.

[BEGINNING OF PART]

[Audio interference over conversation while Howard sets up the recorder]

Ok, so we've discussed the 1948 strike. The next thing I want to talk about briefly is the emergence of real clear factionalism in Local 10 especially. We have a blue slate of fairly conservative people, and you have the progressive slates running.

[01:30:49] **ASHER:** That started in the McCarthy period.

[01:30:51] **HOWARD:** Yeah. Now, what's the sources of that? And how accurate is it a reflection of left and right currents within the union?

[01:30:57] **ASHER:** It was a very accurate reflection.

[01:30:59] **HOWARD:** It was?

[01:30:59] **ASHER:** Yes. The leading group was the Catholic trade union league.

[01:31:04] **HOWARD:** That's ACTU, isn't it? The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists?

[01:31:09] **ASHER:** Yeah. Their leader was Jim Kearney who became president several times. They had a number of other people. You go back and find the people who run for office or were elected, I can pick out which ones.

[01:31:24] **HOWARD:** You could?

[01:31:26] **ASHER:** Oh, sure, if I had the slate in front of me.

[01:31:28] **HOWARD:** Ok, because that's what I want to do.

[01:31:29] **ASHER:** I knew who they were.

[01:31:30] **HOWARD:** I've got a few slates that I've already picked up from the ILWU library.

[01:31:34] **ASHER:** Yeah. There was a big fight, and that was a period of time in which there was an organizational bloc between the Trotskyists and the Stalinists.

[01:31:45] **HOWARD:** Oh, is that right?

[01:31:46] **ASHER:** Oh yes. I sat in meetings across the tables from Bridges, and we worked out how to fight this.

[01:31:51] **HOWARD:** Is that right?

[01:31:52] **ASHER:** The only time he was ever civil to me.

[01:31:53] **HOWARD:** That's incredible. I didn't know that.

[01:31:55] **ASHER:** Oh, sure.

[01:31:58] **HOWARD:** So you guys were in alliance with the CP on those kinds of questions, right?

[01:32:02] **ASHER:** There's another guy you should talk to, Seldon Osborne.

[01:32:05] **HOWARD:** I spoke with him—and I spoke with him last time I was up here. My impression was—he said that the Trots were in opposition.

[01:32:12] **ASHER:** To what?

[01:32:12] **HOWARD:** That they sided with the ACTU people and stuff like that, I thought. Now, I could be wrong.

[01:32:16] **ASHER:** Horseshit.

[01:32:16] **HOWARD:** No?

[01:32:17] **ASHER:** Uh-uh.

[01:32:18] **HOWARD:** Maybe I got the story wrong. It's been a long time since I've heard that interview.

[01:32:22] **ASHER:** Well, I see what he's getting at.

[01:32:24] **HOWARD:** But he was talking about syndicalists being opposed to Bridges, some remnants of syndicalism.

[01:32:28] **ASHER:** Yeah, that's true.

[01:32:30] **HOWARD:** And the ACTU people, conservatives. But as far as you know, the SWP was in line with the so-called left in this case, right?

[01:32:39] **ASHER:** Oh, yes, all the way through. It doesn't mean that—during the end of the 1948 strike, the people that would later be the leaders of the right wing during the McCarthy period, which had just begun—the Taft-Hartley bill was just passed in 1947, and then the other things started happening after that. But during that

strike, the right wing had a better position than Bridges.

[01:33:14] **HOWARD:** During that strike? That's important if that's true.

[01:33:16] **ASHER:** They had a better position than Bridges.

[01:33:18] **HOWARD:** Can you explain that, what that meant?

[01:33:20] **ASHER:** Yes. The CP still had the remnants of this class collaborationist position they had developed during World War II which showed in the exemption of military cargo—which they agreed to. Of course, there were quite a few who agreed on that, too. But it was not the CP so much, but the union, the membership that had gone through the '46 strike that insisted on closing everything down. Kearney, who was a Catholic, was one of the leaders of that.

[01:33:57] **HOWARD:** For closing it down?

[01:33:59] **ASHER:** Close everything down. He was for it. It carried in the strike committee meetings before the strike had ever begun.

[01:34:08] **HOWARD:** Did the union leadership vacillate on that question? It doesn't sound like they did so much, but—

[01:34:13] **ASHER:** I don't think so. I don't think there was any big debate. I think it was sort of a general agreement: we don't want to go through another strike like the '46 strike. Because you can't win anything that way. If you want to win all the things that we'd put up on the table, you're going to have to close everything down. There's no other way you can do it. I don't remember—I probably have notes.

[01:34:32] **HOWARD:** Because that would be crucial.

[01:34:33] **ASHER:** I probably have notes on it.

[01:34:38] **HOWARD:** My problem is this—what separated the right from the left?

[01:34:42] **ASHER:** When?

[01:34:43] **HOWARD:** From '48 to '52. Make it '49 to '52, let's do that.

[01:34:48] **ASHER:** First of all, let's understand where they're coming from. The right wing generally is in agreement with capitalism, but, if they're workers, they sometimes have to fight individual capitalists, right? They're in favor of preservation of the capitalist system, but their fate, as trade union leaders, is tied up with the unions. That's not true of the CP. The CP, they're concerned with the trade union movement, but many times politically their trade union policy is determined by their attitude toward the Soviet Union and the needs of the Soviet Union. Which explains their class collaborationist attitude towards World War II. During the '48 strike, the right wing was to the left of Bridges.

[01:35:39] **HOWARD:** In the sense that they argued for a tight strike?

[01:35:42] **ASHER:** A tight strike, against working the foreign ships, and so forth.

[addressing new person entering the room] Hello, Tony. This is Howard.

[01:35:50] **TONY:** Hi

[01:35:50] **HOWARD:** How're you doing?

[01:35:50] **ASHER:** He's interviewing me on some trade union questions.

[01:35:54] **HOWARD:** See, I guess the problem I have is why we even talk about left and right. Left and right, to me, I view on a political spectrum. It sounds like we're talking about militancy, which is another dimension here.

[01:36:05] **ASHER:** No, see, in a union you operate a little differently. In the political world, there's no such thing in a capitalist class as a lesser evil. We don't believe the Republicans are better than the Democrats and so on. That's our point of view. It's always argued, of course, by other people like Social Democrats that there's a difference. But we don't.

[01:36:26] **HOWARD:** Yeah, right.

[01:36:28] **ASHER:** But, in the trade union movement, almost on a month-to-month or year-to-year basis, there are lesser evils. Those lesser evils—they're all in the union, right? Those lesser evils are determined by what is good for the union right then. What kind of struggle are they engaged in, what is the best way to fight it, and so forth. Sometimes, old trade unionists who love America can come out with the best policy for fighting for the workers right then and there. It would be sectarian not to support them against some group of left-wingers which have a worse policy. Just because they're members of the Communist Party or members of the Socialist Party, you don't automatically line up with them.

[01:37:13] **HOWARD:** Right.

[01:37:14] **ASHER:** It all depends on the issue, you see? And the issues, especially towards the end of the 1934 strike, the right wing was to the left of Bridges.

[01:37:23] **HOWARD:** Now, I'm sure the CP's response would be that you could make an ultra-left error out of being worker-ist. That you just push so hard on that front that you alienate support from the ranks, or you just make impossible demands, or whatever. So the right was more militant, certainly.

[01:37:38] **ASHER:** More militant.

[01:37:39] **HOWARD:** Yeah, ok, for my own writing it makes more sense to talk about political militance, radicalism, and labor militancy. Sometimes they coincide, but, as you say, sometimes they don't.

[01:37:51] **ASHER:** They don't always.

[01:37:51] **HOWARD:** No, not by a long stretch. So, then, generally, from '49-'52, the right wing differed from the left wing how?

[01:38:01] **ASHER:** Oh, yes, well, the strike had been won. Decisively. And the unionists really, even today—that strike is the one that made the conditions that we have today. Because it demonstrated that this is a union that will fight, tie up everything, and so on and so forth. That's sort of vitiated by the last strike, 1971-72 strike which was a terrible strike. Nonetheless, we're still banking on that. We're still a unified union; it still has a tradition. It still has people who went through the '48 strike in it, not too many anymore. And it has all these radicals that came in 1959, '61 draft, '63 draft. It still is potentially a very powerful union. The employers know that. They know it, and they're not going to monkey around with it if they can help it.

[01:38:59] **HOWARD:** Still takes good stands on El Salvador and everything else.

[01:39:01] **ASHER:** Yeah, for sure. Bridges always did things like that. That's his left cover.

[01:39:08] **HOWARD:** What about that question—what was the basis of right wing opposition to Bridges from '49-'52? What were they arguing?

[01:39:16] **ASHER:** Over the Marshall Plan.

[01:39:19] **HOWARD:** Did that mean anything to the rank-and-file?

[01:39:22] **ASHER:** Well, the international executive board took a position against it, and the right wing was for it, over Greece and a few things like that. There were a lot of issues.

[01:39:37] **HOWARD:** My sense is one of the issues was screening.

[01:39:39] **ASHER:** Screening? Oh, a big issue.

[01:39:41] **HOWARD:** That's a big trade union issue.

[01:39:42] **ASHER:** Definitely. That's the issue where Bridges and I actually sat down.

[01:39:47] **HOWARD:** Oh, is that right? And the right's position was what? Unconditional support for screening or something?

[01:39:53] **ASHER:** Oh, yes, they wanted to get all the radicals off the waterfront. That included me! They would have liked to throw Bridges off the waterfront.

[01:40:00] **HOWARD:** You think that those questions of left and right, those labels, were accurate? Pretty much?

[01:40:05] **ASHER:** Oh, yes, they were accurate. They were accurate both on a trade union and on a political level.

[01:40:10] **HOWARD:** Even though you told me before that sometimes there was an inconsistent relationship between political radicals and militancy.

[01:40:17] **ASHER:** Well, in this case there wasn't.

[01:40:18] **HOWARD:** There wasn't, though. That's important to know. So, you're saying—

[01:40:21] **ASHER:** It was inconsistent in the '48 strike. There, the right wing was more radical than the so-called left.

[01:40:26] **HOWARD:** Ok.

[01:40:27] **ASHER:** Except for Trotskyists.

[01:40:28] **HOWARD:** But left and right labels then make sense after '48.

[01:40:31] **ASHER:** Yes, I think so.

[01:40:34] **HOWARD:** Do you think the membership saw it that way? That here was a left winger, here was a



right winger, sort of thing? And they were consciously making distinctions?

[01:40:41] **ASHER:** By and large, anybody in the union that has not developed political will take their stands on the issues. If Bridges got a better position, they'll support him. Got a lousy position, they'll vote against him.

[01:40:52] **HOWARD:** Because a thing that's peculiar is if you look at the positions from '49-'52, they're alternating in office a left and a right winger in every position almost. It goes from Kearney to [Germaine] Bulke, and Bulke to Kearney, that sort of thing. What does that mean?

[01:41:06] **ASHER:** Well, usually when Kearney'd come in, he'd be in for two years. Then Bulke'd come in, and he'd be in for two years, right? Sometimes there was some overturn between. Then there were other people that were in office at the time, too, weren't there?

[01:41:19] **HOWARD:** [?Walter Nelson?] ?

[01:41:19] **ASHER:** [?Walter Nelson?] , yeah, he was in just for a short period of time. Now he is a Catholic; he was a member of that same group with Kearney.

[01:41:26] **HOWARD:** Let me show you what I've got here—

[01:41:27] **ASHER:** And he was a chairman of the strike committee in 1948, [?Walter Nelson?] . I worked very closely with him.

[01:41:36] **HOWARD:** Was he really?

[01:41:37] **ASHER:** Yes!

[01:41:38] **HOWARD:** See, that's interesting stuff.

[01:41:41] **ASHER:** [?Walter Nelson?] . Which makes my point.

[01:41:43] **HOWARD:** Yeah, exactly.

[01:41:44] **ASHER:** He was a guy I worked with. He was a guy that when I needed money for my operations, which were clandestine, he was the guy I went to and got the money from.

[01:41:55] **HOWARD:** Let me show you a list here. See if this makes any sense. I don't know if you can read these names or not. Two lists. There's the right wing slate; those are all the people running for various office in the years indicated. I've got them coded with the office's name. Here's the left wingers. What I wanted to do—it's incomplete because I don't have complete slates from all the elections—was then study these guys and see what the characteristics were of each group, particularly when they joined the union. If that had any impact, the timing of the union—like if it was in World War II.

[01:42:30] **ASHER:** [Inaudible] . Does it make any difference?

[01:42:32] **HOWARD:** No, it doesn't to me.

[01:42:34] **ASHER:** Ok, see, this is not a left wing slate.

[01:42:38] **HOWARD:** Which was is that?

[01:42:38] **ASHER:** Progressive. They call them "progressives."

[01:42:39] **HOWARD:** Yeah, progressives.

[01:42:40] **ASHER:** You see, when you make up a slate—

[BREAK IN RECORDING OF INTERVIEW]

[01:42:43] **HOWARD:** —the big one about the durability of Bridges. Why was Bridges alone among left wing leaders in this country able to stay at the top of that union without any serious challenges that resulted in lost membership or anything like that? I'm sure you've thought about it.

[01:43:02] **ASHER:** It probably starts from his role in the 1948 strike.

[01:43:06] **HOWARD:** '48 or '34?

[01:43:07] **ASHER:** I mean '34 strike. The fact that the union stayed healthy—see, it was the most democratic union. It stayed healthy. In really a healthy union, it's pretty hard to get a right wing, and the only people who could have ousted him would be a right wing. Or, in the case of some big upsurge of labor, maybe a left wing. Really, during this whole period, the only people that could have thrown him out would be a right wing. A right wing just did not develop in that union. They're the only ones that could have done it. It just did not develop in any size.

[01:43:47] **HOWARD:** Why?

[01:43:49] **ASHER:** I think because of the way the union was formed. It came out of battles. It had a lot of seasoned workers there. Because of the nature of the industry, too. You tend not to become conservatized in a transportation, especially where you have casual workers. That is a fact.

[01:44:14] **HOWARD:** What about the ILA?

[01:44:16] **ASHER:** People that come into that union—well, the ILA was a little different. Even there, it had this clamp put on it by the right wingers and the mob, but I think probably down below there was still a lot of radicals there. Ex-merchant seamen just like here. But they didn't have a chance to speak out. Here, because of the '34 strike, the way the union was established, through battle, the way the '48 strike was conducted as a rank-and-file strike—100 people on the strike committee where Bridges could be outvoted—I think that is the basic reason. There wasn't anything of an economic nature that the right wing could hang their hat on. They couldn't say the union's losing this, losing that. They did point to a few things, but there wasn't anything decisive. That the union was actually going backwards. During this whole period, up until quite recently, there really was no unemployment. You could work six, seven days a week, except for right after World War II when they had a recession.

[01:45:26] **HOWARD:** The other unions didn't go back, either—in Mine Mill [International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers] or UE or anything like that, as I know. The appeal there was, "These guys are Communists. We don't want Communists in charge of our union, so let's throw them out, boys." They managed to do that in Mine Mill and UE and a lot of the others.

[01:45:40] **ASHER:** ILWU was independent.

[01:45:43] **HOWARD:** It became independent, right.

[01:45:44] **ASHER:** 1949.

[01:45:45] **HOWARD:** Yeah, but all those other ones became independent. They left the CIO in '49. The IUE

[International Union of Electronic, Electrical, Salaried, Machine and Furniture Workers] attacked them, and the steelworkers attacked them. They talked about bringing the ILA out here and raid them, but they never succeeded.

[01:45:57] **ASHER:** They tried it. That's what [?Shaw?] tried to do.

[01:46:00] **HOWARD:** But he failed.

[01:46:00] **ASHER:** He failed.

[01:46:01] **HOWARD:** That's significant. The question then is why they failed in those raids, when they succeeded in other unions. I mean, let me tell you—one thesis is that there was a radicalized base there of some extent that was able to fend those off. It was critical in the sense that it was tilt-a—

[01:46:19] **ASHER:** And they were never able to convince the membership that there was anything to gain by going this road.

[01:46:24] **HOWARD:** But they did in the other unions; that's what puzzles me.

[01:46:26] **ASHER:** They did it through terror. They did it through setting up rival unions, which they were never able to do here.

[01:46:34] **HOWARD:** Of course, the fact that they weren't able to do it just pushes the question back again—why weren't they able to do it? Because the ILWU was so strong with its left wing. That's the answer, as far as I can see.

[01:46:43] **ASHER:** I think so.

[01:46:46] **HOWARD:** But when I pushed Archie Brown on this question, he was real hesitant to say anything about that the masses or the rank-and-file had been radicalized. Only when I pushed him, he said, yeah, there was some radicalization that took place. But he reduced it to basically pork chops like most people do. Bridges delivered, and that's why he was there. But I don't find that a very satisfying answer.

[01:47:04] **ASHER:** Then why did the union go along with all stands on various international questions, which it did?

[01:47:12] **HOWARD:** Well, academics say, "Because the men didn't care less as long as Bridges delivered." I don't believe that. It assumes that we're better at unconscious—

[01:47:20] **ASHER:** Big meetings, we would have big battles on say the question of say the Marshall Plan [aid from U.S. to Western Europe] . The union would vote against it. They would support the international executive board; they would vote against it, against the right wing. On all sorts of questions like that.

[01:47:41] **HOWARD:** Question is whether those meetings were representative of the rank-and-file or just the activists—

[01:47:45] **ASHER:** They were goddamn big meetings. Thousands of people there. Up until fairly recently, we used to have meetings every single week.

[01:47:52] **HOWARD:** I know.

[01:47:53] **ASHER:** Every week, and you would have 3,000 men there. Can't say that's not representative. Of

course, during the strikes, we would have big meetings at the Civic Center—we would have 10,000.

[01:48:12] **HOWARD:** I think that in some respects the ILWU was legitimately considered a left wing union. Not just that its leaders were left, but that the rank-and-file had somehow absorbed—

[01:48:21] **ASHER:** I think that's true. I think it really was a left wing union. Now the Mine, Mill, and Smelters—they put up a tremendous battle, too.

[01:48:29] **HOWARD:** They did. But they suffered tremendous defections at the same time until they actually joined the Steelworkers [United Steel, Paper and Forestry, Rubber, Manufacturing, Energy, Allied Industrial and Service Workers International Union] in '67. UE, of course, lost over two-thirds of its members to the IUE. The whole basis of attack there was red-baiting. Because the UE was delivering the goods, better than the IUE in fact.

[01:48:44] **ASHER:** They were in collaboration with the employers.

[01:48:46] **HOWARD:** Who, the UE?

[01:48:47] **ASHER:** Of course they were! The right was in collaboration—

[01:48:49] **HOWARD:** Oh, the IUE. Yeah, right.

[01:48:51] **ASHER:** IUE and unions that were attacking the Mine, Mill, Smelters were in collaboration with the employers, too. It was a pincer move, see? But actually, the employers were satisfied with the relationship they had with the ILWU. They, by that time, did not see Bridges—though there was a section of the waterfront employers that saw Bridges as a big danger, you know the big red baiting thing—but there were a lot of them that didn't. They saw it as a good relationship; they were making money. They said why disturb it? You get two unions on the waterfront, you're going to have a lot of trouble that we don't need. I think that was a factor, too. But there never was a real collaboration.

During the McCarthy period, the best they could do was bar known radicals from work on the Army-Navy docks. They never were able to bar them from commercial docks. The union took a stand, as you know, that if one person were fired for political reasons or refused work for political reasons on the commercial docks, that was considered a lock out, and the whole coast was shut down.

[01:50:06] **HOWARD:** Were you screened, by the way?

[01:50:07] **ASHER:** Sure I was screened. I never worked Army-Navy during that whole McCarthy period of time.

[01:50:16] **HOWARD:** It really didn't have much of a difference, right? Because there was sufficient commercial cargo.

[01:50:20] **ASHER:** Actually the best jobs were in commercial.

[01:50:22] **HOWARD:** That's what I heard.

[01:50:25] **ASHER:** After the union took that stand, then everything needed to stop because employers didn't want to shut down. They pushed hard. The union took a good stand; the employers were divided. That's basically the story of it, as far as I'm concerned.

Then you had this radical background, guys who were willing to fight. Certain number of guys, even old-timers

who didn't agree with Bridges' politics at all, that admired him, thought he was great.

[01:50:58] **HOWARD:** Why?

[01:50:58] **ASHER:** Because of the role he played in the strikes, 1934 strike. There was a mystique about Bridges, a real mystique.

I know I've had conversations with even right wingers, and I start criticizing Bridges for his politics and so forth—they say, “Ahhh, it doesn't matter. What the hell are you talking about? Look, he's a good labor leader. He led us in the strike. He's a good guy. You know, what are you going to answer to that?

[01:51:27] **HOWARD:** [laughs] Right. Especially if they're right-wingers. Well, I think that is significant, that somehow Bridges was able to win over—or at least neutralize—conservative workers.

[01:51:38] **ASHER:** He's a very clever politician.

[01:51:41] **HOWARD:** Yeah, but it isn't just that.

[01:51:44] **ASHER:** He can shift the position in midstream. He adapts to the people he's talking to. He's clever. [Henry] Schmidt's smarter.

[01:51:55] **HOWARD:** That's what I heard.

[01:51:55] **ASHER:** [Germain] Bulcke's smarter. [Howard] Bodine was smarter. Bodine was the architect of the M and M [Mechanization and Modernization Agreement of] .

[01:52:04] **HOWARD:** Oh, is that right?

[01:52:05] **ASHER:** Oh, sure.

[01:52:06] **HOWARD:** Portland, right?

[01:52:07] **ASHER:** Yeah, he came out of Portland. He was the architect.

[01:52:09] **HOWARD:** Yeah. I didn't get that sense of savvy from Bulcke.

[01:52:16] **ASHER:** He's a very old man.

[01:52:18] **HOWARD:** Yeah, maybe that's—

[01:52:19] **ASHER:** He's a very principled man.

[01:52:21] **HOWARD:** Yeah.

[01:52:22] **ASHER:** I liked him.

[01:52:23] **HOWARD:** Yeah.

[01:52:24] **ASHER:** I ran into him at a meeting a while back.

[01:52:26] **HOWARD:** Did you?

[01:52:27] **ASHER:** Yeah, and we had a little talk. We liked each other.

[01:52:30] **HOWARD:** Who's this guy out of Portland that was just incredible? All I've ever read is statements that he made. God, he was a genius. Just based on his ability to interact with professionals and employers and stuff like that in various committees. I can't think—he was from Portland, only around for a short period of time. He ran for some big office and lost and left the industry.

[01:52:50] **ASHER:** Is he the one that became a lawyer?

[01:52:52] **HOWARD:** During the war—it's possible. He had the smarts for it. He was really a brilliant character. I read some of his letters that he wrote and stuff.

[01:53:00] **ASHER:** Well, listen, I have work to do.

[01:53:01] **HOWARD:** Ok. Could you give me [Shaun] Maloney's number? Do you have that handy?

[01:53:05] **ASHER:** Yeah.

[01:53:07] **HOWARD:** Maybe I can at least write him a letter if nothing else. Would he respond in writing, do you think?

[01:53:46] **ASHER:** Uh, probably.

[01:54:04] **HOWARD:** Ok.

[01:54:12] **ASHER:** Mention my name.

[Howard and Asher move away from the recorder. They can be faintly heard until Howard retrieves his recorder.]

[01:57:15] **HOWARD:** Yeah, I have to go back and filter through and see what I've learned. But, some good points you made.

[BREAK IN RECORDING OF INTERVIEW]

[01:58:16] **ASHER:** —discussing the problem within our organization the other day with a young person. Hadn't been around very long. I'll be goddamned if he didn't come up with a real key idea about what the problem was. I thought it over—I thought, "Gah! This guy doesn't have much experience, but he came up with a real good idea." You can't tell.

[01:58:38] **HOWARD:** Sure.

[01:58:38] **ASHER:** Sometimes it just clarifies something that you've been thinking about for a long time.

[01:58:41] **HOWARD:** That's right, yeah. And I go through, and I listen to these again—

[END OF PART]